OVER THERE

Josephine M. Hill

TC 660H
Plan II Honors Program
The University of Texas at Austin

May 7, 2020

Oscar Casares
Department of English
Supervising Professor

Elizabeth McCracken
Department of English
Second Reader

Abstract

Author: Josephine M. Hill
Thesis Title: Over There
Supervising Professors: Oscar Cásares, Elizabeth McCracken

I've written a creative work that follows two boys turned soldiers during the Vietnam War. I'm interested in characters at are entirely unlike myself, challenging the nature of perspective and power of narrative to approach universal experiences. *Over There* is a novella that has been informed and shaped by historical research and explores the chaos, confusion, and contradictions that are characteristic of Vietnam Era literature, much in the style of Tim O'Brien, Karl Marlantes, and Philip Caputo.

To my father who taught me how to tell stories,
And to my mother who taught me how to listen to them.

Table of Contents

Over There

When Axel Fletcher died they spelled his name wrong on the death certificate. He was my best friend. I talked to his mother after she got that thick military packet with all his documents and insurance. Mrs. Fletcher pulled out that final certificate, and the *x* and *l* were backwards. First thing she said was, "I told that man not to name our son Axel."

The Fletchers didn't want Axel to go to Vietnam in the first place. He was supposed to go to college. He was supposed to go study numbers, wear jeans to class, and help his father sell insurance plans. Three colleges had already sent him acceptance letters. Mr. Fletcher said Axel could take the family car, if that is, he happened to stay in Illinois, somewhere like Peoria or Springfield. He was even warming up to the idea of Indianapolis, anything but farther north to Wisconsin. Axel had nothing to worry about—his draft number was high, somewhere in the 300's, so he could have rode out the war without a second thought. But instead, he went down to the recruiter's office and enlisted. As a Marine, no less.

I didn't know he had it in him, and I'd known Axel a long time, since that day I walked into Town Groves Junior High as the new kid. I remember that day because I was so terrified. Didn't know a soul there, but somehow, he and I got to talking about comics. He was going off about the new *Fantastic Four*, thought they were a bust. I told him to go pound salt—had a bit of a temper back then. For some reason, he took to me after that, and before long, we were every day after school together in the reservoir park where acres of grassy fields came up right to his backyard. We spent every minute we had in that park, stomping down grass for a makeshift baseball diamond, collecting stones to throw in the shallow creek, and trying to catch the yellow-eyed cat that wandered out back there. We always talked about building a fort and camping out.

He and I would spend hours at school passing notes back and forth with drawings of teepees and lean-to tents, but we never did make anything out there. Most of the time, we would walk straight from school to his house and head out to the reservoir, clutching comics and a few crackers for the cat.

There was some point right before eighth grade, the city bulldozed the west half of the park to construct a new football field for the high school. Axel and I hardly knew what to do with ourselves since they had put up chain link fences. We went to his house most afternoons and messed around in his backyard, but it wasn't the same, boxed in by their neat cedar fence and Mrs. Fletcher popping her head out every hour or so asking if we wanted a bite to eat. Now that's not to say I didn't enjoy the snacks. She did something magic with her lemonade—I could have sworn she used real lemons and not the powdered stuff my younger sister and I used on special occasions.

Eventually, Axel asked when we could go to my house and I considered it.

"If we go to my place, my sister won't leave us alone," I said.

"I don't mind Audrey," he said. "She's kind of funny, you know, for a kid."

I couldn't think of anything else to tell him, so the next day after school, Axel walked home with me and Audrey. We lived further from school than Axel did and in the opposite direction. When we turned down Andover Street, I let Audrey take my key. She loved being the one to unlock the door for some reason and would be pouty all afternoon if I didn't let her. Brass key in hand, she bounced ahead of us, standing on her tip toes to unlatch the chain link fence to the backyard. I heard her *harrumph* and knew my mother was already home and had left the door wide open.

Audrey darted into her room and shut the door, leaving the little wooden name plaque she made for herself swinging. As soon as I walked in, I could tell it wasn't a good day. All the blinds were drawn, and the basement door was shut. I threw my backpack on the shoe matt by the door and headed for my room, expecting Axel to follow, but he was sitting outside the open screen door trying to untie his shoes before coming inside.

"Come on," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Give me a minute! I just want to take my shoes off," he said.

The floorboards seemed to shake, and I heard my mother fumbling in the basement.

"Sam," she called up. By the flat tone of her voice, she was just approaching her tipping point. "For Christ's sake, close the screen door."

"Hey, is that your mom?" Axel said from the porch.

"Keep your shoes on, let's go." I said, trying to push him into the backyard.

"No way, you said you'd show me your new *Tales of Suspense*."

The basement door cracked open, as my mother came up the stairs. Her hand clutched around the doorknob.

"I've told you a million times, close that fucking screen door," she said, the sweet smell of sherry of rolled from her mouth in waves. She pulled me inside by the arm and gave me a sharp slap on the face. "When are you kids going to learn?"

Going to close the screen door, she finally noticed Axel, who had been standing stock still outside, and her shoulders dropped. A slack smile crept over her face. "Sammy, aren't you going to introduce me to your friend here?"

Axel must have told his mom about that afternoon because the next day Mrs. Fletcher came over herself. I was glad I was the only one in the living room. When I heard someone knocking at the front door, I had thought Audrey locked herself out again, but there was Mrs. Fletcher in her boxy knit shirt, Mary Kay smile, and a cherry sponge cake in her hand.

"Hello, Sam," she said, perfectly. "Is your mother home?"

Thankfully, my mother was in the basement, and in no condition to walk up the stairs, so I told Mrs. Fletcher that she was out on errands. Mrs. Fletcher pursed her lips, handed me the cake, and said she would have to stop by another time. She dropped in a few more times, and I continued to run interference between the two. Finally, I had to tell Axel to call his mother off, and she dropped it.

But every now and then, Axel would come by my house on the weekends and drop off with a lasagna or potato salad, and I knew his mother had sent him. I didn't mind the food so much, not one bit. I just didn't want Mrs. Fletcher to look at me and Audrey like she did already, with those big sad eyes.

Now, there was this girl, Linda Colwell. She was the eighth or ninth hottest girl in our grade, depending on if you liked brunettes, and I knew Axel was keen on her. His face would flush a deep red all the way down his neck whenever her name came up. I noticed sometime in the fall that he had started coming to the football field much earlier than me—we still met there most days. I would be coming from Mr. Albright's garage shop where I helped out when I could. The man would only let me work a few hours a day before shooing me away to do homework, supposedly. From there, I wandered over to the fields to meet Axel. Used to be, I would always

have to wait for him to show up. He hated getting there early. Didn't like just kicking around when there were things he could be doing, he always said.

But the week of cheer tryouts, sure enough, he suddenly had no qualms about loitering around the reservoir all by himself, finding a convenient row of benches by the field where the girls were warming up. Mr. Schaefer, the cheer coach, was a tough son of a bitch. He wouldn't have stood for any other boy lingering around, except Axel, who somehow always had an in with the teachers. Axel just brought a pencil and a book maybe, planted his butt in those bleachers with his head down, and smiled mildly while explaining "I'm waiting for someone, Coach. They'll be here before long."

That's how Axel, the cagey bastard, was able to give Linda Colwell a very quiet "good luck" as she walked by, and without me there howling or tossing an elbow in his ribcage for his nerve. That's probably how Axel Fletcher—the boy who couldn't throw a baseball to save his life, the one with perpetual ink stains on his chin from chewing pens, the one who cried when he overfed his guppy fish and it died—got two dates with the ninth hottest girl in the grade. Not just one pity date to save face, two.

I didn't even know about the first date, had to hear about it from my little sister, who heard it from Lenny Jackson. My own sister. Audrey was so goddamn smug about it too. I didn't believe her at first when she started giggling behind her hands.

"You mean, you didn't know?" she asked, clearly enjoying my discomfort. We were at home, and it was late. "Axel took Linda, that's Linda Colwell, mind you, out yesterday, and they went to Fleur's Ice Cream, and I know for a fact that he walked her all the way home."

"Liar. I know for a fact," I sneered, "that Axel's never talked to Linda Colwell in his life. Doesn't have the guts."

She knotted her skinny arms across her chest. “I’m not a liar! Lenny Jackson told me so.”

“What the hell you talking to Jackson for, you little slut?” I said. That did the trick. Audrey shot upstairs and slammed her door before I could say anything else.

I fumed for a good while after that, couldn’t believe that Axel would do anything like that without talking to me or even telling me about it afterwards. Dodgy bastard, I thought. There wasn’t anything we didn’t tell each other.

What made it worse was at school, the next day, he bounced up to me like nothing was the matter, just started blathering about how Mr. Nelson said “orgasm” instead of “organism” in Life Science, the one class we didn’t have together. I didn’t laugh, not even a grin. I just set my teeth and resolved not to talk to him for the rest of the day, or at least until he came clean.

After school, I went straight to Mr. Albright’s garage and tried to stay as late as I could. There was nothing exciting to do, just a few rear lights that needed bulbs. The Boswells brought in their old Comet that kept leaking in the front foot well, which was an easy fix. Mr. Albright reset the pollen filter housing while I cleaned out the battery housing. Of course, I was still itching to get at the Daytona Blue Corvette, a Stingray, that had been in the shop for about a week, but all Mr. Albright had let me do was straighten the wiper blades, which means by the time the sun went down, I was sweeping the garage for the second time that day.

“It’s getting late, Sam,” said Mr. Albright, coming around the rear of the Boswell’s car. He was wide and stocky, but every now and he managed to sneak up on me with his old rubber-sole boots. “Why don’t you head on home?”

“You sure?” I asked, looking at the Corvette’s glossy bulk in the harsh overhead lights. “When are we going to get around to this one? Becky Jackson said she wanted it specially looked at.”

Mr. Albright ran a hand over his short beard, leaving grease marks on his cheeks. "*Mrs*. Jackson isn't in any rush." He switched off the warm lights clamped to work bench, and the sudden whiteness left by the overhead lights was harsh.

My eyes adjusted as I checked the red clock face above his work bench. It was still early enough that Axel might be at the reservoir.

"You don't need me to finish patching the Comet? I can close up afterwards, like last time."

"That's alright, Sam. Besides you hate patching," he said, taking the broom from my hands and motioned for me to sit down. "Tell me, how's school going?"

I grabbed the creeper seat and shrugged. "Just the usual."

"Your mother still looking for work?"

"No, she knows someone at the Bloomingdale's who was setting on getting her some weekend hours sometime." I squinted at him. "She's doing just fine. We all are, even Audrey."

Crossing his arms, Mr. Albright nodded, more to himself I think than to me. "And what about you, Sam?"

"Fine," I said. "He wrote to us, just Audrey and me, I mean."

Mr. Albright started turning on work lights, aiming them at the Corvette. "Are you going to write back?" he asked while gesturing at the flashlight at my feet.

"Don't think he really wants us to." I shrugged again. "What, are you writing a book?"

He didn't say anything as I leaned over the popped hood, sweeping the light over the sleek gray insides, not yet grease-speckled from use, and noted the tri-power carbs.

"Mrs. Jackson said Mr. Jackson found a big puddle of coolant under the car one morning," he said quickly, as he took the flashlight from me. I smiled despite myself.

With Mr. Albright perched over my shoulder, the light in his hands followed my eyes with hardly any delay. I spun off the radiator cap, and murky green coolant was right at the surface where it should be. I ran a hand along the engine, following the drive belts to the water pump and felt for cracks in the hoses, making sure they were elastic and not spongey, but everything was in great shape as far as I could tell. The car was only a few years old, but I poked around for rust spots just in case, not finding any, of course. Just a week ago, this exact Stingray was sitting pretty on the lot under sagging strings of festival flags.

"Any white smoke?" I asked. Mr. Albright wagged the flashlight, no. I checked the return pipes, the plastic reservoir, radiator hose, and cooper heater cords, even stuck my head down the driver's side foot well and sniffed for coolant. Nothing. He followed me with the flashlight cocked in the bend of his crossed arms. With the desk lamps shining, our shadows layered over each other like a tangled chain of paper dolls.

"What have you and Axel been up to?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said and popped my head up. "Why?"

"Easy, easy," he mocked, not unkindly. "You've got something on your mind, Sam. In all our time together, you've never offered, not a single time, to finish detailing a car. Called it 'sissy work' and threw a tantrum last time I asked you to."

I tried not to blush in the driver's seat and ran a hand along the wide steering wheel, marveling at the leather bucket seats. "I don't know," I said. "He's been acting funny, is all."

"I'm sure it'll blow over," Mr. Albright said. "Young men have short memories. It's the best and worst part about having them around." He motioned for me to hop out of the car, and I did, reluctantly.

"So, what did I miss?" I nodded towards the open hood of the car.

"Nothing, you did everything alright," he said. "You could have turned the engine on. Sometimes leaks only happen when there's pressure in the system, or if something gets good and shaken up."

"But Mr. Jackson found the leak in the morning, in his garage?"

"Yes, he did." Mr. Albright let loose an easy laugh. "And would you imagine his shock? Pulled in the driveway with a brand-new Corvette, only to have it dump a whole lake of coolant the next morning."

"He ought to strangle the greased-up jackass who sold it him, all butchered like that."

"Easy now," Mr. Albright said. "Tim's a straight man. He hasn't made a bad sale yet. There's nothing wrong with this car." He tossed me the flashlight, closed the hood, and looked sideways at me. "You do silly things when you're angry, Sam. See, Mrs. Jackson and Mr. Jackson are in a bit of a tiff. She plucked out the core plug and asked me to keep the Corvette safe for a week."

We laughed for a long time over that one.

"Go easy on Axel, Sam," he said as I was finally leaving.

Although I left Mr. Albright's smiling, I didn't make up with Axel for a long time, not even after he didn't ask Linda Colwell on any other trips to Fleur's. Some part of me got angry every time I saw him, another part of me was embarrassed, so I made excuses not to see him, until eventually he caught on.

It wasn't until spring, track season, that we really had to talk to each other. We were on the same 4x800 relay. He was the third leg and I was last. Our first outdoor meet, something happened in the race. I was way out by the 200-meter line, cracking my knuckles and scuffing

the red asphalt-bound track, so I didn't see it happen. Something funny with the handoff between the second runner and Axel. Later, the kids in the home stands swore they heard a sharp crack. All I heard, from the far corner of the track, was a scream. It was Mrs. Fletcher. I stared at the sudden tangle of faded green-and-blue uniforms, the confusion of thin pale limbs, and then saw Axel clambering to his feet in the mess, trying to run with one leg horribly twisted behind him. He stumbled and there was more yelling and people were swarming around him. The muscles in my legs were taut. Axel was still trying to wave people off and force his legs one teetering step after another. With something in his leg near snapped in two, that idiot was still trying to finish the race. I was sprinting before I knew it, screaming his name. He stopped struggling when he heard me, long enough for the coach to grab him by the arm and convince him to lay down his back.

I learned in that moment the difference between him and me. Never in a million years, would I have tried to finish a race like that.

I remember Mr. Fletcher, a stout man, gruffly shoving his way through the thick ring of students and a small number of parents who had bunched together, near enough to see but not within range of being asked to help. I remember how he bent low and pulled Axel close to him, shouldering his son's weight as they slouched into each other. The Fletchers drove him off to the hospital. Afterwards, no one was sure what to do. For the one or two kids who had parents there, it wasn't long before they had their arms jerked by a panicked hand, and they were driven straight home. The rest of the team waited for someone to tell them the meet was canceled.

I don't remember if that ever happened or not. I stood at the white, sprayed-on ten-yard mark for a good long time before, feeling utterly useless, until I just started walking away from the field, not exactly headed home, not exactly headed anywhere on purpose. There was nothing

on my mind that night, except the big, stupid backwards grin Axel tossed me in between winces as his father muscled him off the track, so I'm not sure how I ended up at the Fletcher's front door.

With mild surprise, I found myself face-to-face with that iron knocker, nailed smartly into the door, hardly splintering the glossy white paint. My cheeks burned hot, despite the cold. I was still wearing my track uniform, knuckles raw and legs numb from the bitter chill of early spring. I retreated to the curb across the street and sat with my chin tucked in between my knees. My fingers dragged through the dirt, making oval loops and dashing them with sharp lines.

The Fletcher's house sat like a big, lazy cat under the only streetlamp on the block. I don't know how long I waited there, or what I was really waiting for, but eventually, Mr. Fletcher's brown Ford pulled in, straddling the two sloping indents in the worn road. He must have seen me because as soon as he parked, he called, "Sam?"

I popped up and, on instinct, made to leave, but he waved me over.

"You okay?" he asked, rubbing a both hands through thinning hair. "Crazy, don't you think? Clean break, the doctors said it was good because it makes for an easy recovery." He patted his pockets for a box of cigarettes that I knew he only reached for when he thought Mrs. Fletcher wasn't paying attention. "Nonsense, absolute nonsense. That Highland Park kid, that's where he was from, he just rolled an ankle, and took out three lanes, just goes to show you. Luckily, that last kid walked away with only a dislocated thumb." Mr. Fletcher nodded his head. "He's still there, of course, Axel I mean. I just came by to pick up some things for him, stuff to do when he gets out of surgery, books, some things to do. Something." He looked at me, as if remembering I was there. "Say, Sam. Do you want to come back with me? Might be a little

while till he wakes up, but I'm sure he'd be glad if you were there. Mrs. Fletcher and I were just saying, it's been a while since we've had you over."

I was already halfway down the block, my sneakers padding dully as I trotted home.

Axel had only been in the hospital for a couple of days when I got word that the newsstand was getting a number of new copies of *The Human Torch*. I took a few *Tales of Suspense* we've both read millions of times and a couple *Super Ducks* just to laugh at and went to finally visited him. I don't remember if *The Human Torch* was any good—we probably disagreed about it anyways. What I do remember is that same big, stupid grin on his face when I walked in.

That afternoon, I learned another difference between him and me, maybe a more the biggest one. He wouldn't have waited to visit me like that. In fact, I knew, he would have been there the first moment he could have.

The next few weeks, I was almost always at his elbow, carrying as much as he would let me while he fumbled around with crutches. At first, I was somewhat surprised he would have anything to do with me at all, but Mr. Albright was right. We were kids, and kids have short memories.

I walked around the football fields; my sneakers already soaked from kicking at the overgrown grass that was still bent nearly in half with morning dew. In the past few years, more and more of the reservoir had been torn up for another field, a baseball diamond, and a parking lot. I sat at the wooden picnic bench under the grotto in the center of the park, now named Village Green. Fat mourning doves flirted from beam to beam of the exposed ceiling rafters, dust and fine down feathers seemed constantly suspended around me. I dug into the surface of the

bench with a dogleg jackknife, adding to the layers of vandalism already scratched and worn on the wood. Axel was probably sitting in Math right now, nose smudged with graphite and scratching out formula after formula with a cramped hand while Mr. Gerald paced in front of the class with a yardstick. I never liked Mr. Gerald. He always found some reason to make me stand at the blackboard with my nose pressed on a chalk circle. He was pure evil, and his class was just a fat waste of time. Besides, I figured I was going to drop out some time soon. I didn't see the point really, not when Mr. Albright was just about to take me on full-time.

I would have spent the entire day at the garage working the old Crosley station wagon. I was trying to revive from junkyard scraps and other jalopy cars, but Mr. Albright never let me work during school hours. He wanted me to finish high school. You never know when that will come in handy, he always said. So instead, I killed time in the park till 3 o'clock.

At some point, I walked home, to let out our dog, Beetle. She was an old yellow mutt with a patchy coat and sagging tits. I heard her scratch on the screen door as I came through the backyard. Audrey hated that I called her Beetle. She was always trying to rename the poor thing, but the dog wouldn't respond to anything else. I was the one who found her wandering the streets with a chewed-up piece of hemp rope around her neck—she was all skinny and gimpy, and she was infested with ticks as big as beetles, which is exactly what I called her. I think the dog was just grateful to have a name at all.

The dog padded after me to the front, stopping to paw at the rotting oak stump on the side of the house. Stepping over the overgrown witch-hazel bushes, I saw the mailbox door ajar. There was only one piece of mail. It was a letter addressed to me from the Selective Service System. I sat on the steps of the porch; Beetle leaned heavy against my shins before lowering herself on the warm concrete.

I read the draft notice twice through. There was a hardness in my throat, and I swallowed a few times, but the tightness seeped into my chest. A month or so ago, a bunch of the juniors—the guys with fall birthdays mixed with the guys who got held back a year—got called in for a physical in downtown Arlington Heights. Since then, the Nichols brothers went ahead and enlisted, each hoping to drive tanks. The two of them drove mean enough as it was. Larry Dover, the baseball team's starting pitcher, enlisted. We all heard how he wrote his girl about the Purple Heart he earned taking shrapnel to the ribcage while lobbing grenades at a nest of machine guns. Now it was my turn, I guess.

Folding the letter into thirds, I slid it back in its envelope and tucked it in my pocket. I had just about a week before I had to report to the post office lobby in the next town over, where I knew the military had set up a temporary station for processing draftees. The dog whined and stretched the length of her spine, her tail twitching happily as I rubbed her soft ears. My first thoughts were about Mr. Albright, worrying how he'd manage the garage without me there. I was just taller than the work desk when I first started helping him out, and it'd been a good seven or eight years since. A few years ago, his eyes started to go, although he tried to hide it, and I'd since taken over keeping the books.

The dog's whitening face followed me from the window as I left to meet Mr. Albright at the garage. As I walked, I snapped the branches of chokeberry bushes, shredded the waxy leaves with my fingers, and crushed hollow cups of acorn shells under my heels. Anything to keep my hands from straying to the yellow letter in my back pocket. When I got to Mr. Albright's, the garage doors were shuttered and padlocked. The door in back was also locked tight, but I knew Mr. Albright kept his keys in his granddaughter's painted ceramic pot, so I let myself in.

We weren't holding any cars, so the garage was empty except for my Crosley, which Mr. Albright always let me leave in the shop overnight. The body was from the Adams' old Crosley station wagon that had been rusting away in their backyard. A couple years ago, back when the draft was still in the hands of local boards, the Adam's youngest kid, Scottie, got a personal letter from Uncle Sam. He was the first one in town to get drafted. Scottie was scared. He tried to jack up the old station wagon and make a run for it. We still can't tell if he was planning on going north through Wisconsin and cutting across Lake Superior or if his aim was Toronto by way of Detroit. Either way, he hardly got anywhere before the Crosley conked out. I remember when he and Mr. Albright came up the gravel road, pushing the smoking hull between the two of them.

"Battery," Mr. Albright grunted as they passed me. He threw me the keys, and I started circling it, already running a diagnosis in my head, while he took Scottie into the tiny broom closet in the back of the garage that served as a much-neglected office. I never asked what they talked about—I didn't even know that Scottie had been drafted at that point, but within the week, he was packing for Vietnam. The only thing I cared about was that Mr. Albright had bought the broken-down Crosley and said that if I got it up and running, I could use have it, which I assumed would be easy, but the junker was in worse condition than I thought. After getting the battery in order, I had to replace every belt. Some rodents had gotten into the wiring, and the hoses all needed to be replaced.

Now it was almost in feasible condition, crouched low in the back of the garage like an old tomcat. On the work desk, I saw a checklist written in Mr. Albright's long, loopy handwriting.

"Nichols: oil change, lube steering-suspension, replace v-belt.

McGregor: replace cabin filter, oxygen sensor, see spark plug.

Sandy: flowers, 7pm."

Sandy was his daughter's kid. I remembered then that he said he'd be out of town for the end of the week visiting family, which didn't leave me much to do. I played with the idea of tinkering with the Crosley—I'd been meaning to resurface the break disks, but I ended up leaving, heading to the park and hoping Axel was done with his testing.

He was already at the bleachers, balancing some old book on his bony knees. I clambered up to meet him.

"You could at least tell me when you skip. Those tests are boring enough as is." He nodded to a paper bag next to him, his mother's cornbread. "She said to try and save some for Audrey this time."

"Audrey's out tonight." No doubt, she was at her best friend's house. She spent more time over there and with her friends than at home, and I didn't blame her. Audrey was still smarting about last night, when our mom caught Thomas Crawford dropping her late off in his piece-of-shit Hudson convertible.

"Well, still. My folks wanted to do something nice. They'll have my hide if I brought it home." He meant the cornbread.

"We're doing alright," I said, shifting my weight and looking around the fields. "Hey, you remember that old cat that used to hang around? It's been a while since I've seen him."

"We ought to have skinned that bastard years ago." Axel tossed the warm bread at me without even from bothering to look up from his book. I could see, under his mess of shaggy hair, the curl of a smug grin.

"Anything exciting coming into the shop?" he asked, worrying the pages between his fingers.

"Nah," I said. "Mr. Albright's out of town, remember? He drove all the way to Buffalo Grove to see his grandkid."

Axel peered sideways at me, holding a hand up against the sun. "Well, how's the Jalapie?"

"For the last goddamn time, it's 'Jal-*o*-py,' and you know it."

He shrugged with infuriating disregard, and I had to restrain myself from chucking the bread back at his chest.

A few deer were picking their way across the field, heading for the creek at the back of the reservoir. Some of the females had fawns with spindly legs trailing after them. One of the fawns was smaller than the others with white fur covering its back legs and stomach.

"There's that little piebald one," I said.

"That brown saddle mark on his back is getting lighter," Axel said. "He'll turn all white before summer's over."

"That's not how it works, and you know it." I drummed my fingers on my knee.

We sat like that for a little while longer. I watched the herd while Axel flipped through his book. As the sun set, he had to squint with the low lighting, and he had this bad habit of humming when he was focused. Normally, I would have told him to knock it off, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I shifted around a bit more. With the draft notice in my pocket, it felt like I was sitting on a brick.

"What's your number?" I asked, even though I knew.

"The war won't last past Christmas." His response was automatic

"Christmas is a long ways away. It was in the 300s wasn't it?"

"315, September 29th."

The tightness in my chest returned. It felt like a string was tangled around my ribs and someone was yanking on the end. I pulled out the draft notice and held it out to Axel. “This came in today.”

He didn’t read the letter, didn’t have to. “What are you going to do?”

“Do? Nothing. I’m no coward like Scottie Adams.” Scottie, the kid whose station wagon I was trying to revive. “He wouldn’t have made it to the border even with a working vehicle.”

“Probably would have gotten lost with his thumb up his ass,” he said. “What about Audrey? Have you told her yet, or your mother?”

I shrugged and unwrapped the cornbread, rolling some crumbs between my fingers.

“But what about you?” I asked. “What are you going to do while I’m running up hills and bagging Reds?”

Before he could reply, I jumped to my feet and marched up the bleachers. At the top, I peered across the field and aimed at the deer, pretending to cock a rifle. “Bang, one. Bang, two. Bang, three!”

Axel cast an arm towards the enemy territory. “By God, Private Sam, cut the fireworks. You’re just about the worst shot I’ve ever seen. See those Commies out there? They’re laughing at your sorry ass.”

In the dark, his laugh sounded disconnected.

“What do you know about it?” I said. “You just sit pretty and safe while the real men do all the work.”

“Oh, shove it.” He sat back down and looked for his dropped book. “I could, if I wanted to.”

“What? Sit pretty with all the girls?” I winced as something hard smacked my shins.

"I meant, go," he said. "Over there with you. I could enlist tomorrow."

"No way, man. You said it, war will be over before Christmas."

"Still, I could."

"You'll have to hurry, before all the fun's over," I said. "Come with me, then, to swear in. We'll at least be in boot camp together."

The string around my ribs was pulled taunt, and I took a shallow breath. Axel was never one to make a rash decision, and I couldn't see his face.

"You'd want me there, really?" he said.

I felt his eyes on me and sat down heavily before shrugging.

Axel picked his book back up, spending a careful amount on time inspecting the cover. *From Here to Eternity*. It was a dirty green color with a brass trumpet. He was slow to nod, but when he did, I let out a long breath and grinned.

"What better way to spend a summer?" he said. "I better go now and break it to my parents. You go too. Audrey ought to hear it from you."

"You're serious about it?"

"Of course, I am. I can't let you have all the fun."

A week later, Mrs. Fletcher drove the two of us to the post office in Mundelein. She cried a bit dropping us off. Axel gave her a swift hug, and I tried not to listen as he told her it would be alright, that he would be back home before she knew it, that he wasn't going anywhere near the exciting action anyways. As soon as she left, he wiped his eyes real quick before turning to me and saying, "Women."

I laughed. My own mother was nursing a sorry hangover, and she was already one day late from losing her job at the Bloomingdale's. And my sister didn't want to miss a cheer practice. Women.

We were early, in typical Fletcher fashion. Before long, there were eight or nine guys milling around the post office lobby. After an ungodly amount of paperwork, they stripped us down and we squatted, stretched, and coughed to their satisfaction. There was a slight problem with Axel's knee, the same one he twisted back in seventh grade, which was also the same one I blew it out years ago with a BB gun. It had healed up, but when he stood straight, he favored his left leg, out of habit more than anything. He assured the nurses that it was purely cosmetic, but they hardly batted an eye. They didn't care as long as he could crawl across the floor and make fog on a pocket mirror.

We were all sitting in short rows of chairs and looking over small blue sheets of paper with the oath we were about to swear, grateful to be properly clothed again, when a sergeant walked in. I snuck a look at the laminated poster on the far wall that explained the different uniforms and realized he was a Marine.

He stood with his hands clasped behind his back and told us, "I need five Army and five Marines. Any volunteers for the Marines?"

I didn't dare turn my head to see if anyone raised a hand, keeping my eyes locked on a point somewhat to the left of the sergeant's face.

"No takers?" He had only waited a moment. "Here we go boys. Marines are first to fight, so you five in the front, you're with me."

That was me. I was sitting front row, dead center. Someone attempted a, "yes, sir," but it came out a feeble mutter. The sergeant sneered at him, if anything. I was suddenly glad we

already gave a urine sample. I might have pissed myself otherwise. The thought almost made me laugh, but I didn't dare smile.

Satisfied, the Marine turned to leave.

"Sir!"

I couldn't help but whipping around in my seat. Axel was standing, staring down the sergeant. His cheeks were flushed beet-red while he waited for the sergeant's nod.

"Sir, I would like to volunteer," he said, his voice steady.

"I already have five men." The sergeant tapped a thick boot on the tile floor. He pointed at the boy sitting at the far right, maybe the one who all the whimpering was coming from. "You hear that, Daisy? This boy here wants to deny you the chance to serve the as a Marine. You going to let him?"

I gaped shamelessly as the boy jerked his head up and down. To everyone's surprise, the sergeant walked around to Axel and offered him a hand to shake. He said loud enough for the rest of us to hear, "This is the last time you hesitate. Do you understand me?"

With that, the Marine strode out, and we sat in silence for a few minutes. The only sound was the rustling of some secretary fluffing a pile of papers.

We swore in, repeating line-for-line some quick thing about the Constitution and the President. I was surprised how short it was. Then a needle-nose secretary told those of us who were sitting in the front row, including Axel, to go to the captain's office down the hall.

I stood up quickly, sending shoots of what felt like static down my leg. I scrambled to reach Axel as we followed the yellow line painted on the floor to the captain's office.

"What the hell was that for?"

"You can't get rid of me that easy." He smiled breathlessly. "Are my hands shaking?"

The Army inductees were shuffled onto a bus headed to Fort Sill in Oklahoma. As for us, we were told that we were flying to Parris Island, one of only two Marine Recruit Depots in the country. It would be my first time in a plane.

It took me a while to get used to the haircuts. There was a guy on base you could go to, but I learned fast enough, to use take my chances with a pair of hair clippers. The first time I saw him, he asked if I had any places to look out for. I pointed behind my ear at a raised, bumpy scar I got when I was ten. My mother had come at me with a front-handed smack, and I dodged her, bashing my head on the kitchen countertop. She had cried in surprise at all the blood, thinking she'd actually hit me into that linoleum countertop. I was petty enough to let her believe it too.

Despite my warning, that skinny bastard buzzed right over the old mark, scratching up half the rest of my head while he was at it. I stuck with my clippers after that. Looked like a plucked chicken, but at least I wasn't bleeding behind the ears every week.

Axel had a harder time than I did with the DI's, the drill sergeants. He did everything by the book: stood as tall as he could during roll call, bloused his boots, tucked his sheets like a pro, all to avoid their attention, but they were like sharks, circling in on him real quick once they figured out he hated being singled out in front of the other guys.

He didn't put up well with the screaming. There was one jackass DI, a big burly relic from the Korean War, who found particular joy in watching Axel break out in a nervous sweat. Sergeant Torres. We called him El Toro, the bull. He would stomp his boots in the sand, kicking up dust in Axel's face while we were on the ground doing push-ups in the dead of night or scream in his ear at the rifle range, inevitably leading to him getting bad marks, meaning the whole platoon was punished with incentive physical training, which looked something like

holding foot lockers or our fully packed seabag above our heads for an hour. I knew if it wasn't Axel, it'd be some other poor fuck, but still. It was hard not to be a little bitter after the fifth night in a row El Toro had us out in the sand pits for something Axel did or didn't do exactly right. It killed him too. Axel would get a pinched look on his face, and that fat vein on his forehead would protrude, and he'd try his damnest to keep his nose clean, not that it helped his case with Torres.

I swear, Axel didn't even swat at sand fleas during inspection, which had the rest of us squirming and itching as covertly as we could. It didn't matter to El Toro. This one time, he stormed up to Axel, got right up in his face, and screamed abuses at him for taking violent action against one of the island's beloved "pets," meaning the fleas. He made Axel dig a grave for the thing—six feet deep with proper corners—and give it a full Marine Corps burial with a final salute and everything. When the ordeal was over, El Toro asked if the flea had been male or female. Unable to reply, Axel had to dig up the fresh grave to check.

It shocked the hell out of the whole platoon when Sergeant Torres personally pulled Axel aside during morning chow and told him he was promoted to Private First Class, gave him a stripe insignia and everything. Of course, Axel being Axel, it made him even more of a whipped dog, eager to please.

The DI's didn't bug me like they did him. I think I even put on weight in those weeks, and only so much of it was muscle. I just considered myself lucky that I was already in better shape than a lot of the other guys. I already knew how to swim, and I was fast, usually coming in first or second in the 300-yard shuttle runs that El Toro liked to have us do right after chow. The only thing I really struggled with was the log running drills. He always stuck me with the shortest guys, meaning I shouldered a lot more of the weight than the others, since I was half-a-

head taller. Thankfully, I turned out to be a pretty good shot, although I'd never handled anything bigger than a .22 before. There wasn't a single day that I didn't qualify with above-average scores with the rifles, which bugged the never-ending shit out of the rednecks and eastern hicks, who grew up nursing Winchesters. I qualified as Expert with a small number of others, which meant I got to wear the marksmanship badge.

After eight weeks at Parris Island, we were infantrymen in the 3rd Regiment of the United States Marine Corps. Bravos, bullet-catchers, grunts, boonie rats, duty MOS 0300. Fodder.

Before shipping out to Vietnam, they gave us thirty days of leave to flex our new muscles from boot camp and enjoy our dress greens while we could.

I don't recall much of my leave after basic. I asked Mr. Albright if I could keep the Crosley parked behind his garage—I didn't trust my mother not to sell it.

"Of course, Sam," he said. Then he whipped his hands slowly on a thin, brown rag, which I knew meant he was chewing on something important to tell me. I cringed a little, fully expecting a forced farewell or a heavy handshake, but he must have decided against it because he just waved me off and reminded me to get back before next spring, when all the cars would come in with salt damage from the winter roads. His cheeks were drawn gaunt over the frame of his face, something I always attributed to old age, but today it seemed like he was sucking on the sides of his mouth, and I realized that he hadn't been looking me in the eye, not for a single moment. That was the first time I got nervous for real about going to the war.

As for Audrey, she was still mad at me for leaving in the first place because it meant she would be alone with our mother. "You're going to come back and leave, just like Dad," she said when I first told her that I had been drafted. Dad, a Commander of sorts, had some minor

administrate role with the Navy during the Korean war, but he walked out after he got back. Audrey was still young when it happened, so I don't blame her for mixing up the details. Most of what she remembers of him came from me anyways. As for my mother, she was just glad that I wasn't in the Navy myself, told me to stay away from the coast if I knew what was good for me. I don't think she realized that Vietnam was on a peninsula, a fact I had only learned recently when Axel showed me a map from a book he found special at the school library. I didn't bother to correct my mother.

Axel spent most of his leave convincing his parents he knew what he was doing. I knew Mr. Fletcher was still furious he had enlisted, said college was the smarter, safer option. Axel eventually asked me to stop coming over—my name had become just short of a curse in the house. When the time came, Mrs. Fletcher did offer to drive me to the airport. She sent us off with a small, cherry sponge cake each, and I knew I was forgiven in her eyes.

We took a commercial flight to from Chicago to San Diego, where we went through processing. There were a couple hundred of us that weekend, slinging our seabags around and circulating any scrap of news we could. We were crammed into buses and shuttled to another commercial airport, off to Anchorage. It was mostly west coast recruits who trained in the San Diego depot. Back at Parris Island, we always called them "Hollywood Marines," since they only had bright sunny days while we sweat like dogs in the stinking swamps, covered with sand fleas. Although I'd be hard pressed to say that the humping up and down the hills of southern California didn't come in handy in Vietnam.

The layover there was short, so we just milled around the airport. From Alaska, there was another flight to Japan. I remember feeling distinctly proud at that point for knowing to ask for a set of pneumatic headphones from the flight attendants. They were showing *Barefoot in the*

Park, and although I couldn't hear anything over the engines going, Jane Fonda sure looked good in all those short dresses.

We deplaned at Bien Hoa Air Base, just fifteen miles from Saigon, and there was another mass bussing to Long Binh Junction. LBJ's vacation stay, we heard some of the other guys joking. Even with the windows cracked, the bus stank of diesel and sweat. I didn't think any of us realized Vietnam would be so humid. Stepping off the bus with a seabag holding everything I owned in one hand felt surreal. For one, it was hot as hell. My cotton fatigues stuck to the small of my back and sweat dripped down my arms. I don't think I ever stopped sweating from that moment on, not even at night.

The base was bigger than any city I had ever been to. I don't count Chicago since I've only driven though it the one time. But Long Binh had some 60,000 people milling around the post with barracks stretching out building after building in the red dirt. There was an amphitheater next to the helicopter pads. Axel heard from the clerk at the post exchange, PX, that there was even a golf driving range for the officers, but I didn't believe that.

Checking in, I was assigned barracks, temporary work, what mess hall to report to, and where to sign out a weapon. I went to the armory, and as I was approaching, a Sergeant came up. He had a tall, skinny skinny Private trailing after him like a fawn. I grinned to myself at the poor fuck. He probably looked sideways at the wrong officer and was about to get some personal harassment at the rifle range. I stopped, stood at attention, and saluted the Sergeant—Lewis, as I read on his chest. He stopped, greeted me, and asked, "Are you a college graduate, Private?"

"Sir, no, sir."

Sergeant Lewis looked between me and the skinny fellow behind him and gave a short breath through his nose. He asked if I was currently on an assignment, and when I said no, he handed me a folder.

"What's your name, Private?" he asked quietly. "Your first name."

"Sam, sir," I said, confused and a little nervous at what was to follow.

"Good to meet you, Sam. Private Johnny Laney." Sergeant Lewis gestured to the boy behind him, who twitched at his name, but his eyes were locked on following a pair of greenfinches. "Johnny, look at me, you're going to stay with Sam, Private Sam." His voice was soft, but his eyes hardened as he looked back at me. "Private Laney needs to sign out a weapon, and you're going to help since he can't read all that well and needs help filling out the paperwork. Walk him through it, Private, and keep him with you for the afternoon. Then come meet me in front of the PX at 1800."

I didn't have much of a choice, but I did start wondering if this kid had a famous daddy I didn't know about.

The Sergeant nodded and added, "He just needs to sign the weapon out, don't let him hold it, and be patient. He's one of McNamara's Morons."

Confused, I held the folder that was handed to me and looked at Johnny. His shoulders protruded from his fatigues in a delicate way, he was so skinny. Once Sergeant Lewis walked off, I tried to make easy conversation with Johnny, but he wasn't all that responsive. His eyes just followed the finches as they flinted and dove around each other. I found it unnerving. I was at a loss, so I pulled him inside the armory. I wondered what politician's kid I must have ended up with.

Turns out Lewis wasn't kidding. When I handed Johnny the form, he held it roughly, looking at it intently and crumpling the sides in his lanky fingers. His fingers curled like a fist around the pencil I gave him, and I watched as he wrote his name in straight careful lines at the top right of the page, like in grade school. I asked the clerk for a new form, ignoring the man's pinched scowl, and tried again to direct Johnny to the line where his last name and first name were supposed to go, and he wrote again in a forced script "Johnny Laney" all on the same line. I realized that he had it memorized probably, but that was all he could manage, so I filled out the rest of the form for him, occasionally checking the folder the Sergeant gave me.

We left the armory, and I was sure to carry both of our weapons even as he reached out curiously for the cold metal. I felt bad for smacking his hands away because he got real shy afterwards. I wasn't entirely sure he knew where he was half the time, and he definitely didn't understand that he had to be fast about greeting officers. He wouldn't stand at attention or he would salute at the wrong times, often with the wrong hand. I was lucky we only got a few odd stares and the occasional snarl—but no one seemed to have the time to really bark at us, which I was thankful for because I didn't know how Johnny would handle himself. I started pulling him behind buildings and dodging anyone I saw approaching. He followed meekly. 1800 didn't come fast enough.

But when the time finally came, and I got him to the PX. I was tempted to take a look inside because Axel had said it was better stocked than the Roebuck back at home, but I didn't want Johnny getting too distracted, so I waited outside for Sergeant Lewis.

When he showed up, Johnny impressed me by doing a proper salute. I hadn't seen him smile all day till he saw the Sergeant.

"Carry on, gentlemen," Lewis said. "How was he, Private?"

“Exemplary, sir,” I said, not willing to admit otherwise. “Sir, if I may ask the Sergeant a question—”

Sergeant Lewis held out his hand for Johnny’s papers, which I gladly relinquished. I hesitated a moment before also offering him the weapon we had signed out. He motioned for me to follow him, and I did. Johnny trailed behind us, sticking to the Sergeant’s flank.

“Where are you from, Sam?” Lewis asked.

The lack of formality coming from an officer scared me shitless, but I had also spent the entire afternoon babysitting what I assumed was someone’s bastard, so I answered, “Libertyville, Illinois, sir.”

“My father’s side of the family was from Illinois,” Lewis said. “You have no idea who Robert McNamara is, do you?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “He’s your Secretary of Defense, the reason we’re here stacking bodies so high, theirs and ours. You understand, Private?”

Only vaguely, and I hadn’t any idea what some mad dog in Washington had to do with Johnny.

“Do you have siblings, Private?” Lewis asked.

“One, sir, a younger sister.”

The Sergeant took a long time to respond. We were almost at the general’s area, which I balked at the idea of entering.

“I had a little sister too. She was like Private Laney, but worse off since she couldn’t talk. Call it recompense, Private, but I’ve taken it on myself to make sure Johnny gets home, you understand me?”

Again, only in a hazy way did I get what he was trying to say. “Yes, sir. But, sir, we’re smack in the middle of a war. What will happen if he gets called into the jungle?”

“He won’t be, if I can help it. He’ll be safe enough in the kitchens,” Lewis said, “at least until I can arrange his discharge.”

I never found out if Sergeant Lewis made good on his word or not, but after spending a few hours with Johnny I found it hard to believe anyone would send him into the bush, if only for fear of him accidentally letting loose a round of friendly fire or getting frightened and wandering off.

After a few days of seemingly random patrols around Long Binh Post, I still hadn’t set foot outside the base. But soon enough, I received a new assignment. Quang Nam Province, some play I had never heard of and struggled to pronounce. The base was called An Hoa, but the higher ups all called it “Duc Duc.” All I knew was that it was close to the DMZ, the northern border. Axel had his long-term assignment as of a couple of days ago. He was going to stay at Long Binh, continue to process soldiers as they came in-country. Ironic, I thought. He’d barley been in-country himself. At the very least, he could write back home to Mrs. Fletcher and stay honest when he would tell her that he was safe, far away from any of the real action.

I caught a ride in a T-41 Mescalero, which was hardly more than an armored crop duster. Seemed like the wings were about to peel off the entire time, and I gripped my helmet glumly as we took off. I was flying out with two other guys. One was a replacement like me, a rifleman I had met briefly in San Diego back at boot camp, Ray Dorman. The other was a Navy corpsman named Matt Lester. I somehow got their names mixed up in my head, almost called the corpsman “Doormat” a few times. But there was no mistaking the two men. Ray was the shortest Marine

I'd ever met, but he was compact, tough-looking. The corpsman was all limbs and angles. He was coming back from emergency leave. That's all he told me. Later, I heard that it was because his wife was threatening to take the baby and divorce him after he signed up for a second tour. Someone pulled some strings, and he got a little time back home to set things straight. He had impossibly thin lips, and his joyless smile put my teeth on edge. There was something close to contempt in his eyes for me and Ray—we were undoubtably replacements for men he knew.

I spent most of the flight looking out the frosted windows of the plane. I goggled at how green the country was. Flooded rice paddies seemed sparkled in the light and palm tree groves broke up the brilliant green with a muted olive color.

At some point, Ray waved at me. He rapped his fist at the window and held up three fingers. Triple-canopy jungles, he meant. We were over the central highlands where back at base we heard that the trees were so dense you couldn't tell when it was night or day. My eyes were glued to the rushing swaths of green. Matt saw the both of us drooling at the windows. He held his hand up, like an airplane, and cruised it down in an arch, like a falling bomb, and winked. "Shock waves just like a rock in a pond," he shouted, and I swallowed hard.

As we flew north, the jungles gave way to lakes and sparkling rivers. I could see the Marble Mountains in the distance as we approached the red dust cloud that lay low in the air over the combat base.

Ray and I stuck close together as the new replacements while Matt melted right back into the squad. An Hoa was much smaller base than Long Binh, and everything was orange-tinted from the dust. We were only in An Hoa for a day, long enough to meet most of the men in the platoon, but I didn't get the chance to see everyone all at once until we were loaded in the back of a CH-53 Sea Stallion, headed farther north, even closer to the DMZ to support the defenses

against the NVA in what everyone hoped was the final efforts of what was marking up as the Battle of Khe Sanh.

The combat base itself was in bad condition. The air strip was chewed up, so the CH-53 dropped us in the northern hills. I gripped my rifle as the helicopter took a sudden dip, knowing the pilots were going to be anxious to get back in the air. Even if it was a cold landing, meaning there were no enemy in the immediate vicinity, there would only be a few moments to get my feet on the ground before it took off again. Light poured into the dark cabin as the back door dropped down, and we all ran out, huddling behind the helicopter, but we had to scatter as the pilot turned the CH-53, spitting a hailstorm of red dust and black grit. I hid my face in my hands, and the helicopter was off and gone by the time I looked up.

It was midday and sweat was already beading down my neck. We were on forward patrol some five miles out from where the officers had dug in with the big guns and radios. Our orders were to look out for enemy and push them as far north as we could or blow them on the spot, up to our discretion.

I was lying in a foxhole with Ray. My rifle was at my side, on top of my helmet and flak jacket, which were both too hot to wear if there wasn't metal flying in your face. So many guys were falling over with heat strokes, that high ups preferred we didn't wear them at all. A platoon on another hill had theirs all confiscated. Officers were threatening to take ours too, but after that other platoon got shredded to pieces with NVA bullets, we fought to keep our jackets.

Ray was working on a B2 unit of fruit, and I was working to trade his crackers for a couple pieces of chiclet gum. He wasn't having it. That bastard loved his John Wayne cookies,

made me fork over a packet of sugar and cream substitute instead. But I wasn't too pissy about it. Ray always made up for hard trades. I knew he'd end up lending me a chapter of one of those filthy books that was floating around the platoon. That was Taylor's specialty. He was one of the automatic riflemen, and he was always finding ways to make a couple bucks either by selling paperbacks a chapter at a time or composing little poems for guys to send back to their girls at home. Not that we got the chance to send mail all that often.

I fiddled with a can of ham and eggs, debating if I wanted to save them or toss Penny a line in the foxhole over and fight over his turkey loaf. I decided against it, not that I cared as much as I was looking for something to do. Instead, I spun my p51 can opener on my palm. That flat piece of metal was my prized possession. It was about a half-inch longer than the standard can openers, the p38's, that came in C-rations. I'm left-handed, and the p38 was smaller than my pinkie and too short for me to use comfortably, so I traded a day's worth of toilet paper for one of the bigger p58's, which I kept strung with my dog tags.

If we weren't humping, we were setting a perimeter, cleaning weapons, taking inventory of ammo, heating up C-rations, scavenging water, nursing saddle sores and bug bites, digging a foxholes five feet deep if you could before you hit the shale layer and had to stop, and a million other things grunts had to manage on the clock. All for thirteen cents an hour—Ray worked out the math in his head on the trail.

When there were a few moments to spare, I hardly knew what to do with myself. Taylor was explaining to me the other day the concept of Bushido. The way of death, he called it. These samurai warriors, hardcore killers in their own right, all practiced some form of meditation like writing poems or having tea in a special way. It was part of what made them so ferocious, that they practiced honing their focus by not focusing. I asked him what his meditation was, and he

said it was making coffee right at the top of a watch. That sounded like cheating to me. All of it seemed a bit pansy and mystical. But I did notice that seldom few Marines were able to sit quietly while in the field. Maybe Taylor was right—we were all resorting to some form of quieting things down, bringing our world back to some small thing in our hands. Either way waiting around sure does get to you.

It was only a few moments before we were getting ready for a patrol. I threw my helmet on with the chinstrap looped over and around the back of the head, since I got terrible acne on my face whenever I actually wore the chinstrap. Everyone except Penny wore their helmets that way. Penny, for one, had a head small as a pin, and his helmet would hardly stay on without the strap. He also heard from some Army dog who told him, "As goes your helmet, so goes your head," meaning if you drop your helmet, you're apt to lose your head next. Penny was a superstitious son of a bitch.

His given name was actually Garry Penticton, but no one could decide how to pronounce his last name, so the lieutenant renamed him for us. As for the lieutenant, his last name was Ontiveros. He was an older guy, twenty-nine, from McAllen, Texas. He swore up and down his daddy was from Durango, but he burnt bright red from more than ten minutes in direct sunlight, so we called him Gringo.

When Ray and I were still the new replacements, I had a rough time with Gringo. He warmed up to Ray right away since he was from Amarillo, which as I understand it, is just as close to nowhere South Dakota as it is McAllen, Texas. It wasn't until Gringo saw my dog tags that I got any traction with him.

Well, at first, he was yelling at me. They gave you two dog tags, and I had tied one through my boot lace. I heard back at boot camp that's what you were supposed to do to keep

them from clanking together around your neck and drawing unwanted attention. But Gringo took one look at my boots and barked at me, “You plan on losing a leg?” His face was red with contempt. “Get that tag out of your boot, Boot.” I was only half-way to my knees before I remembered to bounce up and snap a salute with a quick, “Sir, yes sir.” He snatched my extra dog tag and took a look at the fifth line, under where it said my gas mask size, and read “Catholic.” Then his whole face lit up.

“See that, boys?” he said cheerfully. “Got ourselves a church boy here, so I don’t want any more of your godless horseshit.”

I gave him a solemn kind of nod, not having the nerve to say I hadn’t been to a single mass in years. Later I came to find, Gringo was a bit of a fanatic himself, thought we were doing the good Lord’s work in the jungle. He stowed a rosary in his front pocket, even though you weren’t really supposed to use your shirt pockets. He even had what he claimed was holy water in one of the little plastic containers for mosquito repellent.

But despite the morning Psalm readings and the C-ration prayers, there was one thing that I would never criticize Gringo for. Whereas most Lieutenants stuck in the back of the line by the RTO’s, Gringo always took point. Later, I found out that it was because he fucking hated Penny, who was the RTO, which was unfortunate because there was always a chance of Gringo missing something essential from the communications pit or wouldn’t be able to reach Penny in time to call in fire support. But I still liked the man on the basis that he took the most dangerous place in the patrol line.

Instead of Penny, Gringo liked to have Barnes right on his ass. Stewart Barnes was a lanky black guy from Maine. Barnes was a short timer, meaning he had less than a month left, which made him extra careful. He also had the sharpest eyes in the squad. Really, he should have

been a rifleman. We were humping this one time, and he spotted a line of fishing wire stretched low between a couple of trees. Normally, that shit is invisible to the naked eye. Gringo already had his foot kissing the wire. There was no way of stopping the rigged grenade from going off, so Barnes pushed Gringo forwards, taking the heat of the explosion on his own backside. It was nothing short of a miracle that he walked away with just a few second degree burns and a Navy Cross. Since then, Barnes always carried a grenade pin strapped to his helmet. He had a theory that if he could ever catch another booby-trapped grenade like the one that almost took out Gringo, he could stop it up with his extra pin. He was wicked canny and crazy, as most short timers were. Understandably, Gringo kept him close. Plus, Barnes was funny as the devil. He was always barking at Army convoys as they drove by, and he had some great one liners.

How do you clear a game of VC bingo? Carpet bomb.

What's the difference between a fighter pilot and a jet engine? A jet engine stops whining when the plane shuts down.

The Marines are looking for a few good men, and the Army takes the rest.

In a way, it was that humor that got him sent home early. We were walking down into a valley on patrol. Our boots were tinged red from kicking up dust, and our forearms shone with sweat. It was fucking hot. Some of the guys had their sleeves rolled all the way up to their armpits, but I preferred to keep as much skin covered as I could. Heat stroke was better than scratching myself bloody from bug bites. Gringo and Barnes led the way as usual. The undergrowth got more aggressive the steeper the hill declined, and I had to slow my pace unless I wanted to tumble into Matt, who was breaking the trail in front of me. All the sudden, the slope evened out. We reached the low part of the valley, and I could just hear the trickle of a creek passing through the hills. There was this white dust floating around, and it went dead quiet. I

heard Penny fumbling with the radio antenna behind me, but that was it. The birds were silent, and not even mosquitoes were whining. I got clammy despite the humidity; the silence was so unnerving. I wiped a leaf with my finger, and some of the white flakes crumbled to pieces. It was ash. Barnes gave a low whistle. “Fire. Barnes found a campfire,” came down the line. The white powder was ash that had floated down from an enemy fire, and they were nearby. I looked around, wondering how many gooks were hiding in the bush, crouching in fresh dug spider holes. There was a shot and then another, and I hit the earth, but it was Barnes. “We got a gook! Barnes shot a gook.” I waited on edge for return fire, but there was none. Eventually, Penny crawled his way over to where Barnes fired. We all circled behind him, but it seemed like there was only the one enemy soldier. It was the first person I saw die. Barnes got him once in the throat and once in the head. We all waited for him to drown in his own blood. Bits of skull and brain fell from the helmet when Barnes plucked it from his head. He threw on the gore-filled helmet and screwed his face into a pout, getting a rude laugh from all of us.

We got out of that white ash valley with no other incidents. But a few days later, Barnes was bellyaching about some pain in his ear. Sure enough, puss was seeping out, and he couldn’t hear out of that side. Matt, being our corpsman, took one look at it and then a sniff and had him flown to Da Nang. Turns out, Barnes’s ear was infected with rotting bits of human flesh. We figured among ourselves a bit of that gook’s brain must have slipped into his ear when he was parading around that bloody helmet. Barnes was back home a week earlier than scheduled and half deaf for it.

I learned to be gentle with the rats at night, shaking them off with slow movements, otherwise I’d get a savage bite. But the rats weren’t half as bad as the monkeys. I never saw a

single one, but at night, they were impossible to ignore. Whole troops of them would get riled up, and they would throw things and scream. It scared the living hell out of me the first time it happened while I was on watch.

Taylor told me not to worry about the monkeys, boars, or even the nine-inch, coal-black scorpions. The worst, according to him, were the snakes. Lime green bamboo vipers with bites that will turn your flesh black. Two-step Charlies, snakes with creamy white stripes whose venom would kill you within two steps.

"Nothing in the good Doc's magic bag will help you then," Taylor said.

"Plenty in the jungle to keep your mind off the tigers," Matt added with a dull smile.

The thought of a snake crawling into my foxhole petrified me. But I found out there were worse ways to encounter an angry snake.

It was November 10th. I remember because that's the Marine Corps birthday. We were all looking forward it because rumor was, they were going to fly out two beers to every Marine in the country, and coming back from a four-day patrol, we were especially motivated to get back to our hill. I was walking behind the FNG, the fucking new guy, we got as Barnes' replacement. His name was Sully, and he proved his use when he spotted a tunnel entrance nearly hidden in the shallow depression of an upturned Banyan tree. Word went up the line to Gringo, and he trotted back to look at the hole. It was tight. He loosened his pack, lit a cigarette, and clapped me on the shoulders. Ray was usually the first man we sent down the tunnels on account of his being skinny as a rail, but he was recovering from a bout of malaria, which meant I was next in line. Sometimes we didn't even bother sending a man down the tunnels—we would just toss a few grenades down the hole and pray. There were all kinds of nasty traps and things that crawled down there. The enemy loved nothing more than leaving a two-step viper tied to the ceiling of

the tunnel, pissed and ready to bite any Marine who forgot to look up. Worse, you might run into an enemy soldier. They would hide in connecting tunnels, wait for you to pass by, and slit your throat. I had all of this and more in my head as the rest of the platoon set about securing a perimeter.

The hole itself wasn't even half a foot across, and even after stripping my flak jacket, my shoulders would only just fit at an angle. I didn't crawl, so much as push my body down a decline so steep that my ankles were above my head half the time. I rolled an angle-headed flashlight along with my chin, left hand reaching for worms and earth to pull myself forwards, right hand curled around Taylor's .38 pistol. I would have used my .45, but I was scared of bursting my eardrum with the higher caliber. For all I knew, I could have been eating dirt like that for a matter of minutes, but it felt like hours, like I had entered a new world where time didn't even exist—only the wet earth and my own ragged panting.

I might have made it some twenty feet down, maybe less, when the tunnel opened up. It was something like two by three feet, and I was able to prop myself on my elbows. The walls were smooth overhead. I couldn't help but think of Axel. He was always scared of going underground. He was petrified of his own basement. Once when we were kids, I tried to convince him to explore the huge storm sewer tunnels at the edge of town. He wouldn't have any of it, not even when I promised him first dibs on the next batch of comics at the newsstand. I couldn't get him to step foot in the tunnels. Now, I don't really blame him.

Up this far north, we didn't find massive underground complexes, complete with kitchens and doctors, but it wasn't uncommon to find a weapon or supplies cache, and those were jealously guarded. But this tunnel, at least, was a bust. I was grateful that it didn't turn out to be a gook grave. They did that sometimes, drag all their dead underground, so we would never know

how many of them there were to start. I decided to turn around, which was easier said than done. The tunnel was hardly wide enough to take the turn at a crawl, so I sat back, pulled my knees forward to my chest, and tucked my boots in to swivel around on my butt.

When I crawled out, dirt falling off of me in clumps, Gringo promised me a night without watch. Beer and a full night's sleep, I thought, what better way to celebrate the Corps birthday. All for a little stroll downtown underground.

We had lost some time with the tunnel, and we were still in thick jungle. But everyone wanted to make sure we had an LZ ready for the helicopter that was supposed to drop off our birthday present, so we made camp a little earlier than usual. I showed Sully how to run spools of det cord around the nearby trees, and we had it ready to blow the moment Penny confirmed a helicopter was coming in. Finally, we heard the heavy thumping of a Huey overhead. We detonated the explosives we had set up. Trees collapsed outwards, and a heavy Burmese python slipped out. She was thick around as a man's thigh and pissed as hell. Every single one of us went running.

Half an hour later, she was hissing and coiling herself around our food and weapons resupply, and more importantly, our beer. Taylor half-hearted suggested taking a few rounds at its head, but no one wanted to risk missing the head and angering it. It was Gringo's idea to throw a bath towel over its eyes, like a horse. The thing went limp, docile almost. He walked right up and shot it right in the head.

We wasted no time in hacking the thing to pieces. We cooked the snake by rolling up marble-sized bits of C-4. It was dry and stringy, but once we added the garlic powder Sully's folks always sent in the mail, it was better. If anything, it made me miss Mrs. Fletcher's cooking. I wondered what kinds of goodies she was sending Axel.

In general, our attempts to freshen up C-rations were rather sad. Matt was the only one of us with any talent for it. If we were by a village, he'd buy some rice and vegetables to mix in with the meat components, and he was constantly scavenging. One time, he found us sugar cane from some local's garden. We chewed those things to splinters they were so good. On patrols, Matt always had his eyes cast upward. Looking for traps, he said. But I knew he was hoping for bananas or breadfruit trees, and I didn't mind because we always shared anything we found. That went for mail too, when we got it.

Taylor had about five or six girls all across the country back home he was writing, and he would let us all smell the perfume and trace the lacy script with a fingernail. Not sure how he kept straight all those details, especially since we had orders to burn any letters we got from home. Gringo would check every couple of days, but we all knew he still carried his Dear John letter, when his long-time girlfriend dumped his ass about a month into his tour. Women.

I hadn't gotten any letters from home, not that I was expecting any.

Another time we were going through a strategic hamlet, where an entire village of locals has been relocated. Intel came in that the VC had infested the hamlet, but as close as we were to the DMZ, we were already certain of that. Gringo led us on a Huey. It would be my first time going to the villages, and the guys must have seen some concern on my face.

"Lighten up, Sam, it's a standard sweep!" Taylor shouted as he ran past me, hefting a M60 machine gun with an extra fifteen pounds of ammunition slung in bandoliers across his chest. Sully trailed behind him with another two bandoliers. It was supposed to be friendly territory, but all "friendly" meant was that the locals hadn't proved themselves to be active threats. It didn't mean they weren't dangerous. A rice paddy worker might not outright shoot

you, but he would let you walk down a booby-trapped trail and blow a leg off. Even if we did find ourselves in a fire fight, headquarters would be slow to allow air support since it was, after all, a friendly area. Hence, the M60.

Once we were in the air, Penny elbowed me. “It’s your lucky day! We’re flying with Tobias. He’s lucky. No aircraft of his has ever been hit.” We weren’t technically supposed to talk flying over combat zones, and everything this far north was a combat zone, but Matt looked over and grinned, which somehow made me feel worse. From the air, the tops of the mountains looked like bare, scaly red scabs on green hills with all the vegetation stripped by bulldozers.

The mountains sloped into jungles, which melted into acres of rice paddies. I saw what looked like ponds, perfectly circular and glistening in the sun. There were so many of them scattered across the rice paddies that I wondered what their purpose was. Then I realized that they were just flooded bomb craters.

They dropped us about half a mile from the village. Humping in, Penny strayed at the back of the line smoking. He blew fat clouds of smoke into the bath towel he kept around his neck. I don’t think I ever saw Penny sober. Even in garrison, he would load a 12-gauge shotgun with a pipe, and all the guys would take hits. They goaded me into trying, but the dope turned my stomach and I couldn’t stop coughing. They had a good time laughing as I was bent in two wheezing, but they didn’t offer to share again.

Passing through the rice paddies, we saw a group of workers wearing coolie hats. Two of them were pedaling this bamboo contraption that looked a stationary bicycle. The back of it sank into a huge pool of water. As they pedaled, small bucket-fulls of water spat out the front. Sully gawked at a couple of brown water buffalos. Mud cracked on their flanks as they turned to low at

us. Penny darted over and gave a female buffalo a big kiss on the snout before shaking the rope harness looped through her nostrils. We ignored him.

Coming into the hamlet, we broke off into twos. I was with Taylor, and we went knocking on hut entrances, informing the locals of our intent to search. I let Taylor do the talking. He might have made a great politician, if he weren't so god-awful ugly. He had a thick jaw and cauliflower ears from a college career of wrestling. Penny told me that Taylor was nationally ranked back home, and I generally tried my best not to piss him off. I once saw him put Matt in a headlock for trying to kip a packet of M&M's.

A couple of women had set up a little liquor store with cases of Pabst, 33, and Black Label beer for a quarter. It struck me then that all the locals we had seen in the hamlet were women or children. There wasn't a single adult male present—not even a teenager. Three kids crouched in the hard-packed dirt next to a box of cigarette packs saw us coming. One of the bigger ones, a boy no older than six, set down the baby he had on his hip and grabbed something from a cardboard box with VIFON instant pho rice printed on the side. He started running towards me. I gripped my weapon, but the boy was waving Coca-Cola bottles at us, holding them as high as he could. "You want Cola?" he said, over and over. Icy water beaded down the side of the glass bottle. The boy gave me a squinted smile under his mini coolie hat, and I pulled out a quarter. Taylor lurched and tried to shove my hand away, but the boy had the coin faster than either of us could react.

Not a second later, more local boys had circled us with little jars of spice, chunks of sugar cane on sticks, sweetheart scarves, and chewing gum. They were all clamoring, repeating the few phrases they knew in English. Some of them tried to sell their older sisters. They made rude hand gestures—two fingers arched in an oval shape even I could piece together. Taylor gave me a

tired look, and I was at a loss. I had tried to learn a couple words in Vietnamese, but quickly found the locals responded to hand signals more than anything or, in this case, demonstration. Taylor pulled out his .45 and waved the kids off. They retreated to their various huts, eyeing us reproachfully.

There was nothing in the village, after all. The most we did was slice bags of rice and kick a few dogs. We left without any incident. There wasn't a Huey to spare for us to catch a ride out, so we humped back to our foxholes, going through the rice paddies and up through the jungle. We grimaced halfway up the mountain, as the thick vegetation gave way to saw-toothed elephant grass. At least it scrapped off the hellish red mud, so we felt clean, if only for a few minutes.

The nights were getting cold. During the day, if there was nothing going on, I would roll my sleeves up as much as possible and hope for a sunburn to keep my warm at night. It was that or cuddle up with Gringo, Matt, and Taylor. They all slept like a nest of puppies, spooned together under the same poncho. Having been in-country together the longest, I suppose they had reached a new level of comfort with each other, I still had some reservations about sleeping so close to another man. It was one thing to have a Marine burn a leech off your ass with a cigarette and another for him to throw an arm around your waist in the middle of the night.

There was a little while before evening patrol, so I brushed fine salt crystals off my face and took the chance to shaving while there was still a bit of light left. Luckily, a Cobra had just dropped off a load of supplies otherwise I wouldn't have wasted the water. Besides any water we collected, we had to purify with Halizone tablets, which made everything taste like metal, and it

hardly ever got all the bugs out. I took eight Lomotil tablets a day just to keep the runs manageable.

I filled my helmet with water and used a busted side mirror from some officer's Jeep. It was Taylor's, he rented it out a dime a shave, which added up faster than you might think.

Our side of the valley was quiet, but occasionally we would hear explosions echo and hope it was our guys doing the firing. Sully had his butt tucked in a foxhole, and he was cleaning his M16. It was one of the new M16A1s that wasn't supposed to jam after two rounds, but then again the original M16s weren't supposed to jam at all. Even fresh soldiers like Sully knew better than to believe what higher ups told us what was *supposed* to happen in the field

Taylor and Ray were cutting up bamboo stakes to make a frame that we could stretch our ponchos over for the night and collect rain and dew water. Even with fresh supplies, water was something we were always salvaging. Matt was squatting on his helmet, scribbling what we all assumed was another reassuring letter back home. For once, Penny wasn't jerking off behind a tree. He and Gringo were crouched together in a foxhole.

The eight-foot-long radio antenna wavered as the lieutenant went back and forth with the higher ups who were stationed a few hills back, clutching the handset that coiled a few feet from the huge portable transporter Penny always humped around on his back. Gringo's face was red even in the low light, and he finally pushed the handset back to Penny.

"Good news, boys," he said loud enough for us all to hear. "No evening patrol today."

No one smiled. There was never *just* good news.

Gringo continued, "Forward observers on Hill 881 are pinned down by NVA. Huey will be here in fifteen minutes."

Sully poked his head his head up, M16 sparkling in his hands. “Sir? We’re taking the hill at night?”

None of us thought any less of Sully for that question. In the dark, not even Barnes would have been able to spot what kind of traps we could be walking into. Plus, we had all heard at least one account of a tiger attack, either the one about the Army kiss-up who was attacked while taking a piss or the patrol that found tiger prints trailing them for weeks before finally waking up without a lieutenant.

“We’re just getting in position for the morning,” Gringo said.

“They’ll be there all night?” Sully asked.

This time his question went unanswered. We tore down our makeshift camp within minutes, and Ray shot a flare once we heard the helicopter come in. The flight was cold as fucking hell.

All of Company E had been called in for support. I was used to going into the bush for a few weeks at a time before being pulled back for some R&R, but some of the teams had been in the bush for over a month.

I met one of the soldiers who had survived the fighting on the hill from earlier, a Navy corpsman from New York. He was flown out on a medivac early in the day while holding one of his rifleman’s throat intact. That man was dead now. His was the only helicopter that had gone in and came out. NVA had shot down two already, and there was deliberation whether or not to tell the guys stuck up there to destroy the downed machines or try to evacuate them, meaning the machines.

Sully and I were talking when the corpsman came up. I was trying to convince Sully to toss his skivvies. He couldn’t decide if I was pulling his chain or not. I was hardly one to care if

his dick rotted off not—I was just tired of him wasting water every night on washing his two pairs of skivvies like some pansy.

"Mosquito repellent?" the corpsman asked, coming up behind me.

I would have told him to shove off, but the man's entire face was puffy with bites. Tiger mosquitoes. Even his lips were bumpy, so I gave him the bottle I kept in helmet band. I asked where his platoon was.

He pointed up the hill and with a chilling, god-killing edge to his eyes. Somewhere between green and mud brown, his eyes were too wide, but worse, they were hollow in a way they threatened to swallow his whole face up.

The whole night, we listened to mortars.

Our squad was scheduled as the last wave of the attempt. We had been in position since 0500, but we didn't start humping up the hillside until the sun was well in the sky. The heat was unbearable, but that was something we were used to. I had a wet bath towel slung around my neck, and what little breeze there was kept my neck somewhat cool.

The entire hill had been blown to hell. What was a forest of young bamboo shoots yesterday was now a black, tore-up wasteland of craters and burnt underbrush. Only a few of the tall petai trees remained standing. In between the charred trunks were dried pools of dark red.

As it was, the morning wasn't so much of a charge as it was a recovery mission. Seemed like the NVA got had gotten bored and went to find some other place to play. All we could find of them was spider holes and booby traps.

Only excitement was a claymore mine going off. We heard the sharp blast, and Marines threw themselves down, looking wildly around for the source. The radio on Penny's back crackled with static, and he stood up, informing us that some friendlies on the other side of the

hill had tripped one of their own mines that they had set up the night before as part of their defensive perimeter. Some gook had come up in the middle of the night and turned it around, so that instead of keeping Marines safe at night, the claymore mine shot half of Company Bravo to bits as they left camp. There was a saying: the VC loved taking our shit and making it their shit. To keep that from happening to us, Barnes used to spray paint one side of the explosives, the side facing out a bright orange, so we knew in the morning if we saw orange, the claymore had been tampered with. But now Barnes was back in Maine now trying to regain his hearing.

We started to waver from formation, and I saw a dead Marine. Almost stepped on the poor fuck, actually. His jaw had been blown off, and his tongue was sticking to the side of his face like some foreign slug, all purple and bloated. There was another man laying a few feet over. His chest was caved in, and his left side was a mangled mess of blood. Sully was looking at a dead Marine over to the left, a Corporal, who had been gutted with a bayoneted or knife and had bled out. I saw the look on Sully's face. He was beyond horrified. I had forgotten that this was his first week in the bush.

Sully leaned over, and he blew chunks all over the dead Corporal. Clouds of disturbed flies swarmed up. Snot ran down his face and he had a death grip on his weapon.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Ray said.

We grabbed Sully between the two of us and pulled him to one of a standing petai tree.

"You going to cry?" I said. I took his canteen and forced him to hold it. "Do what you need to do, but don't you fucking cry, man."

"Don't look at the faces," Ray said. "Come on, Sully, soldier up, you can't do this right now."

Sully wasn't responding to either of us. He was looking at the knot of fallen bamboo, where the dead Corporal and his bloodless wounds were open to the heat. His face convulsed and he screwed up his eyes. Tears came streaming.

"Jesus Christ," I said. I shoved Sully back to his feet and I dragged him, stumbling, to the Corporal. "Look, at him! 'Goddamn it. If you want to see, just fucking look! Get an eyeful already."

"Sam!" Ray yanked me away from Sully, who had sunk to his knees. "Fuck off, Sam. The hell is wrong with you?"

I took a step back, on to the hand of another dead Marine. We tend to die in clusters. I stood and watched as Ray pulled out Sully's poncho, and the two of them spread it over the length of the Corporal's body. Sully swallowed hard as they rolled the body over and carried it like a bag of rice to the line of dead Marines the others had started. There was a Sergeant with a line of automatic shots right across his forehead. Someone, I'll bet it was Penny, propped him up against a tree, so that it looked like he was calling roll for his platoon of dead men.

The sun was climbing, and the smell was getting to even the best of us. Everyone was smoking, just to have something besides rotting flesh in the nose. Sully wasn't the only one who vomited. I heard Taylor gag a little when he pulled on a man's arms and they popped out of the socket. Bodies rot fast in the humidity and heat.

We didn't find a single dead gook—just trails of blood, where their companions dragged the bodies away with wooden hooks.

There weren't enough ponchos and tarps between all of us to bag all of our guys. I remember watching the first loaded Huey take off with arms and legs sticking out the sides, like

a bloated centipede. With such heavy loads, the pilots basically threw the helicopters into steep declines, following the slope of the mountain, to gain the momentum they needed to lift safely. It took four Hueys two rounds and a good part of the afternoon to fly all the bodies out. At the end of it, we at least got a ride to our next assignment as Company E was redistributed thorough the surrounding hills.

That night Ray came up to me and clocked me square in the face so hard that my teeth were sore from rattling. He got me pretty good, an even split between my jaw and cheekbone.

"That was his fucking cousin, you moron," Ray said.

By the time my black eyes faded, Sully and I were thick as thieves. But I don't think Ray ever forgave me.

The next few months were a blur of aimless patrols and sporadic firefights in the hills. We never engaged with the enemy for too long. They knew it was Marines who were in the hills. See, when ambushed, Army dogs will sit and heel, but Marines will scream and charge, and the enemy they learned real quick that Marines don't take prisoners. Mostly, the NVA preferred to slink back and attack another day. If they did stick around for more than some minutes of a firefight, you knew they were protecting something.

Eventually, Gringo must have decided we earned a break and a good one at that. He put in a request, and we were pulled off the hills and back to Da Nang. It wasn't Saigon or Bangkok, but we weren't complaining.

The first thing we did when we got to base was *tactically* acquire a bunch of LRP rations, the freeze-dried meals that were for the Special Forces guys, and we ate ourselves sick. The LRP's had the same basic options as the C-rations and wouldn't fill you up quite the same as, but

everyone knew they tasted better. We also conducted a little midnight STE operation. That's strategically taking equipment, as I pieced together. Matt and Taylor knew an S-4 officer who was always looking with captured NVA and VC trophies in exchange for frozen steaks and fresh fruit. They came back triumphantly, arms loaded with boxes, and we stuffed ourselves silly for the second time that day.

I felt pretty salty walking around base with my face all tanned and my boots worn as hell. The Army dogs gave us some distance, and FNGs gawked openly. Their wrinkled noses reminded me how much I stunk, and I liked that new sense of bravo.

The winter monsoons were just giving way to spring monsoons, which at least meant a couple more sunny days. But it still came down heavy when it did rain, so hard that in a matter of minutes you could fill three canteens with rainwater just from sitting with a poncho on your knees and scooping it out with a helmet. It was one of those kinds of rains coming down when I got caught by some sergeant loitering around.

He told me to find a shovel and start digging out the latrines. Even while I on R&R, I couldn't catch a break. The latrines were a goddamn fucking mess, and not a Seabee to be found. Now, the set up wasn't anything fancy to begin with. We had these metal drums, fifty gallons, and a few planks of wood laid flat across them with a couple holes cut out. Not a friendlier sight after months of C-rations. With all the rain and all the boys, the metal drums were in danger of tipping in the mud, and no one wanted to deal with that. If an officer fell in that mess, some Private would probably have gotten court martialed.

I didn't mind it too much after all. It at least got me out of burn duty that afternoon. Burn duty was just about the most unpleasant thing you can image. Hundreds of pounds of, mostly

liquid, human shit all up in smoke, and you had to stand there with your thumb up your ass and a lit cigarette just to mask some of the smell. At least, I had a stick and a can of diesel to keep the flames going. If I didn't burn it, some VC would use it as fertilizer.

I was coming back from digging out the latrines. All I wanted to do was find a dry enough place to light a cigarette. Time was on my mind at the moment. I'd been in Vietnam eight months, and I wasn't too optimistic about the remaining five.

Of course, I knew guys who were on their second tour, looking for their third. This one black fellow I met from Chicago told me, the moment he got home and looked at his empty apartment, he spun his ass right around, signed a DD 1049, and within weeks he was back in-country. "I forgot to feed my cat, and it plum died," he said. "Could smell it the second I opened the door."

As for myself, I grabbed a copy of *Stars and Stripes* as soon as I got to Da Nang and counted the days I had left in-country. But I didn't let myself think about home too much. I just kept that number in my head, ticking days off, might as well have been counting down to another mission.

My head was down with my boonie hat dripping water on my chest. My fatigues were soaked from the rain, clinging to my skin, black with shit and a bit of mud. That was when Axel came my way. I didn't recognize him; thought he was an officer at first. I just remember thinking, that pretty officer better appreciate how flat those drums are sitting, asshole. He sure as hell appreciate the Private who dug them out. That goddamn son of a bitch better have the best shit of his life.

That's when I noticed the officer was looking right at me, never a good sign. But it was Axel. He was just so clean kept that I mistook him for an NCO. It was the way that he was

standing, all pigeon-toed and favoring his left leg, that I knew it was him. He had put on weight, and his face was rounder, softer. I swear even his eyes had gone wet and milky. I remember that girls back home always said he had these big brown cow eyes. He had his big, stupid grin on his face. And I, gaunt and windburt, gave a whoop of laughter.

We smoked that night outside the communications bunker. I never smoked before the war, but cigarettes were cheap, and someone said that they would help with the diarrhea.

Axel had been in the rear this whole time. He had only just been sent north to Da Nang for this week and then he'd be back at Long Binh. He was chattering, wanted to know where my platoon had been, how I ended up so near the DMZ, if I had heard anything from home.

It was a little much, actually. I had only gotten one letter, I told him. It was from Audrey around Christmas time. She had forwarded a postcard our father sent, scribbled some well wishes, and told me that the dog had died.

Axel gave me a sad little smile and put a hand on my shoulder. "Aw, I'm sorry, Sam. Beetle was a good dog," he said.

I squinted at him. I could hardly remember what the bitch looked like.

"Anything else?" he pressed. "I've been getting about a letter a week from my folks. They ask about you, you know. They were worried when we got separated back in Long Binh."

I rubbed a hand across my face. To be honest, he was getting on my nerves already. I snubbed out my cigarette, tucked the butt back in the pack, and pulled another out in the same motion.

"Can you believe it, Sam? Here I was worried that I wasn't going to see you for another, what, few months? But here you are, my best friend, all the way over here." He was practically bouncing on his heels. "What's the matter with you? Come on, I just want to talk."

His boots were still in good condition, hardly any scuffs or signs of real wear. They might as well have been shower shoes. He just kept talking, don't think he could have stopped if he wanted to. He told me about one of the few times he'd been in the bush.

"I was sitting in this bird," he said. "I was there, worrying if I counted out enough ammo. It was a steep drop, and the Marines on the ground had only just blown the LZ, right? So the pilot brought us real low. Someone said, 'Jump,' and I made fast time, being closest to the edge, hopped out with my full pack on, right into a rice paddy. Must have been a six-foot drop. I'm surprised my ankles didn't snap in half because that hurt. Well, I fell flat on my back, like a turtle, splashing around, but my goddamn boots were stuck in the mud, and I couldn't get myself up with all that gear on, you know? The water wasn't that deep, but on my back as I was, I was stuck coughing and sputtering in the water till a few guys pulled me out of the mud, and right out of my boots. Some smartass said something about jumping with water wings next time, and the whole platoon started calling me Water Boy."

I laughed at that one. We had our own Water Boy in Company E, a fat greaser from Alabama who got shot because he got stuck in a rice patty, just like Axel did. Difference was, we were coming into a hot landing, with green NVA tracers lighting up the belly of the Chinook. We were dropped right into a firefight.

"I still can't shake that nickname." Axel smiled.

"Alright, I'll top that," I said, thumbing the filter of my cigarette to flick ashes over his boots.

"So," I began, "we're stopping in this hamlet village. The 2LT was on edge, right? We had intel that VC were crawling all over the hills, and we didn't need another Pinkville." I ignored the questioning tilt of his head and continued, "No one was in a real friendly mood,

didn't want to get too close to anyone in the village, and for sure as hell didn't want those gooks near us. But all these women start coming out, brats hanging off every limb. They spotted the field medic. Even without a red cross band, they can tell. Poor fuck—Oswald was his name. He was stuck with his Unit One bag. They rushed him, greedy little hands clutching on to his jacket and everything. Now the doc wasn't fazed at all. He just starts handing out these little things from his pack; safety pins, gauze, toilet paper, cigarettes, rolls of tape. One of the kids, a girl, I think, walks away with a tourniquet around her neck like a scarf.

"After that, we loosened up and just nosed about. It was midday, and we were all sweating like pigs. At some point, I wandered off to take a crap. Still don't know why I didn't take someone with me, which turned out to be one of dumber things I've done in this war. But, anyways, I was away from everyone back in the tree line a bit. Not fifty meters in, I came to this clearing. There was this stone altar, swear to God, in the middle of the trees. this tiny little thing, not three feet tall, looked like a giant birdhouse. No one had visited it in a while. Moss was creeping up and down the whole front side, and there were these black, curled-up bits of mango skin in front of it. Probably been there since before the fighting. It was as good a place as any to take a shit.

"So, there I am," I said, "taking on shit on God's doormat. I stand up and realize that this gook's been watching me the whole time, not ten feet away. There's a Type 56 rifle, the Chinese kind. hanging off his hip. We're standing there, looking at each other. He's got something in his hands I'm thinking it's a grenade. Maybe he's one of those suicidal types. But then I realize he's holding star apples, for the altar, you know? He has one of those wooden pendants swinging around his neck. I figure now, he must have been one of those religious kinds. Buddhist or something."

“What’d he do?” Axel asked. I gestured for another smoke, and he offered me one from his hip pocket.

“Nothing,” I said. “I sent that son of a bitch to meet the honorable Buddha himself, called the squad and we burned the village to hell.” I huffed, and a stream of smoke slide from my mouth straight in Axel’s face.

“So he was, wasn’t he?” he said. “He was Buddhist. Think that’s why he didn’t shoot you first?”

“Fuck if he was.” I put out his cigarette on the bunker’s timber frame. “Let me tell you, I know for a fact that he wasn’t Buddhist. No, really, he wasn’t even the enemy, wasn’t even Vietnamese. He was just there. And he didn’t shoot me first because I was always going to be the one to shoot him. It was goddamn destiny.”

“Destiny?” he repeated. “We’re Catholic, Sam.”

“Not here we aint,” I said, enjoying the silence that followed.

I caught those big sad cow eyes of his giving me a sideways look. But I didn’t know what his problem was. After all, he was the one who wanted to talk. “Besides I’ve only seen one Catholic chaplain out here,” I said. “But he’s dead now.”

“I thought they were non-combatants.”

“Fucking hell, man. Mamasans with newborns are combatants now.” Now I was the one who couldn’t stop talking. “I have another one for you.”

“I don’t know, Sam. I might have to get going soon. There’s two new companies coming in tomorrow from Okinawa and processing them all is going to be a bitch,” he said. “What about tomorrow?”

"No, sir," I said. "Scuttlebutt is that we're heading out tomorrow, back to the hills. Now are you going to listen or what?"

Axel tucked his hands up under in his armpits and leaned against the bunker.

"About a few weeks ago, I was on a double team patrol, so there were eight of us, give or take a rifleman," I said. "We were going through this valley. You could feel the temperature drop, but not much mind you, as we went downhill. We got to the bottom of the valley, and the whole thing was covered in this fine, white dust. Every leaf was painted with what looked like snow, dirty gray snow. And it was quiet. No birds screaming, nothing. Even the mosquitoes stopped whining. It was eerie. Then the point man finds the remains of a fire, just a tiny pile of black embers, still warm. We realize that the white powder was ash from their campfires. Enemy was in the area, and they knew we were coming. It was bad, bad news.

"I was scared absolutely shitless. There was a round of fire. Three bursts, an automatic. The grenadier—Dawkins, Tim Dawkins—dropped. I thought he was dead till he started moaning. They got him pretty good. Right in the back and out through his stomach in a big bloody mess. I was on my belly, face first in the dirt. We all were. I shoot off a few rounds at random, aiming up as best I could. Course, no one could tell where the sniper was. There was another round of fire. One, two, three. It was Dawkins again, as he was going for his helmet. He rolled over, screaming, and they got him again. He jerked away—shot again, in the elbow. Every time he popped and twitched, shot and shot and shot. But nothing vital. They were messing with him, messing with all of us, seeing who would risk their hide to go get him.

"Lieutenant had already called in for helicopter close support. We heard the *whoomph whoomph* of a Huey coming in. We had to blow an emergency LZ, so we lit up the valley as best we could to give those guys cover as they set up the C-4 explosives. The sniper hadn't shot back

in while. Maybe we got him. Maybe he had crawled off somewhere to bleed out. We had no idea, but we weren't taking the chance.

"Finally, the lieutenant popped purple smoke, and the medivac came in. We were already running. Some two men had Dawkins between them. We had only just gotten him in the cabin when the whole valley was alive with fire. They were dropping mortars on us. Green tracers flooded the area and lit up the Huey. Bullets ripped through the hull. It was a trap, you see. They just wanted the Huey."

Axel's face was white and drawn. "Well, what happened?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" I said. "We got out. Called in Willy Peter, that's white phosphorus bombs, and burned the whole fucking valley."

We didn't say much after that. The next morning, a CH-53 flew my squad back into the hills. Axel was busy pushing pencils, so I missed him on the way out.

That week I caught a lucky break. I took a punji stick in the foot. The NVA loved those fucking things. Bastards had left this little ditch, no more than a foot wide, and covered it up with mud and teak leaves. One minute, I was shooting shit with someone on patrol. The next second, I felt like I had tripped, and then I was screaming with a bamboo stake popping out the side of my ankle. It went straight through the heel and up a good five inches, and I tore up my foot pretty bad trying to wrench myself free. The thing was barbed, like a fishing hook.

Lieutenant called in a medivac, since it was a slow day anyways. Before dropping me off at the clinic, Penny clapped me on the shoulder. "Lucky bastard, you just punched your ticket home."

He was right. I got a wicked infection from that punji trap. Medics told me the stake was probably dipped in something awful, something along the lines of human feces, just to add insult to the injury. It was clear that I was going to be out for more than a few weeks, so they shipped me to a Japanese hospital in Okinawa, where I flirted with pretty nurses for a week. The Red Cross gals were my favorites, but they got skittish when we started talking about anything bloody.

There was some mix up about the number of beds, so they kept me in the amputee ward for a while. That was rough stuff. I saw double and triple amputees, enlisted and officers alike with white sheets tucked around various wounds. Some of the guys smelled bad, in a gut-clenching kind of way. No matter how many times the nurses changed their bandages, there was no masking the smell of flesh rotting away on live bodies.

We complained about the reconstituted milk—it was too sweet, and we told stories about our squads. A bit of old rivalry came out when I heard how easy the Army boys had it; some of them had three hot meals a day. I wondered how they even ended up in the amputee ward. But I was downright sour when I heard other Marines talk about their experiences in the rear with cold showers at camp, weekly mail, and mamasans you could hire out to do your laundry. Later, I learned that for every grunt like me in the bush there were some thirteen, fifteen REMFs acting as support. That's rear end motherfuckers, as we said in the bush.

They were able to tap down most of the infection in my ankle, only had to remove some of the tissue on my heel. It hurt like a bitch to put any weight it, but the nurses told me to be good about keeping up my exercises or else I would lose function of the whole foot. So, I drank my milk and took my Darvon shots like a champ. I felt lucky. Some of the guys were on a near constant drip of Demerol and morphine.

I ended up stateside within the month. Medical discharge with honorable standing. I thought that was especially funny, seeing as I couldn't stand with much honor on that bum foot.

At Okinawa, I surrendered all my ammo and tactical gear, and I was on a plane to L.A. and then to O'Hare. In between flights, I conked myself out with pain meds.

It was early in the morning when I landed in Chicago. Later I heard of guys who came back to fucking crowds of protestors and hippie nonsense, but I didn't get that. Not at first. It was just Audrey there to pick me up, and I was half-surprised when she rolled up in our mother's shitty Ford Pinto. She must have gotten her driver's permit while I was gone. I tossed my crutches and luggage in the rear hatch and clambered into the passenger's seat.

She had cut her hair right at her chin, made her look like a boy, and I told her so.

"Shove off," she said, but we were both smiling. "Mom stayed up real late last night. She wanted to make you a breakfast, real special."

I hadn't eaten since L.A. since I slept most of the way on the plane. But still, even after months of C-rations, the thought of my mother's cooking put my teeth on edge. "Can you stop at Burger King on the way?"

I also had Audrey stop at the Jewel-Osco grocery store, and I bought all the chips and cigarettes we could carry out of there. Money wasn't on my mind in the slightest. I had also tried to buy a case of Coors, but the cashier said I was too young when I flashed my ID.

Audrey got off the highway and turned into our neighborhood. She couldn't have been going more than 45 miles, but I had a fist curled around the arm rest. The houses seemed to pass by in a blur.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Audrey, can you slow down?"

"What do you mean?" She let up on the accelerator and the Pinto slowed.

"I don't know. You're just going a little fast is all."

"Calm down, Nana. That's just the speed limit."

The streets were still empty, so she drove slow for the rest of the way home. Hopping out of the car, juggling my crutches and seabag, I realized that I had been used to humping maybe a mile a day in the bush or riding in Jeeps that crawled no more than 10 miles an hour. Everything that was on the ground moved slow because fast meant walking blind into traps and enemy. I wasn't used to the carefree speed.

It wasn't long, maybe a week or two, before we got word that Axel had died. Eight months in Vietnam, and he died in a bus crash on base. No firefight, no mortars, not even an IED. He might as well have died of papercuts.

The Fletchers invited me over immediately, and I went without hesitation. I almost wore my dress greens but decided against it. The minute I sat down, Mrs. Fletcher had a bowl of tomato soup in front of me. She always served it with a grill cheese, which she buttered on both sides, and dill pickle

Mrs. Fletcher asked if her son prayed while he was over there. She always said "over there," never "in Vietnam." It was her only flaw.

"Pray? He prayed all the time," I told her. What's the harm? I told her that Axel found God in the jungles, that he became the most holy man in the entire U.S. Marine Corp. I told her that he carried a picture of the three of them, the one I took, with mom and pop each with a hand

on his shoulders. He kept that photo tucked in his standard issued book of Psalms. The boy couldn't go a single night, couldn't go on a single patrol without kissing that photo for good luck.

She liked that. It probably never crossed her mind that I only saw her son the one time. But I didn't mind Mrs. Fletcher's questions. At least she asked questions.

That was something I didn't get at home. It was just a lot of empty stares from my mother, when I could track her down that is, and vague allusions from Audrey. I could see where she was coming from. She was in high school, and she didn't support the war because no one would support the war in the next coming months and years. But I had at least hoped she would support her older brother.

I think she still blamed me for going off to war, as if I had a choice in the matter. She never said it, but I could tell as much.

Audrey would be sitting there on the couch. Every evening at five, Walter Cronkite would come on CBS, and she'd watch as he read off whatever battle or skirmish happened that day and the number of American casualties. It was like he was reporting the score of a football game. It was hard for me not to think of Sully and his dead corporal in those moments.

My sister would just sit there, rattling the ice in her sweet tea with a knife, and she would hum a little before saying something like, "Nixon hasn't got any idea what's *really* going on," and "Those poor boys, and oh, those poor mothers," or "Don't they know people are dying over there?" She never asked me about those poor boys, and I doubt she asked our poor mother anything either.

And that's when Audrey would look at me. I know she didn't mean to be mean-spirited, but little head tilt that asked *what was it all for?* That was pure evil. But she'd pin me with that

innocent questioning look like I could give her any answers. As if I could explain the war to her, like the whole thing was my idea.

Most of the time, I could ignore her. But one time, just this one time, I let her get to me.

There wasn't anything especially memorable about the day. It was a weekend, I'm sure, because I was on edge from staying home all day. No one else had been in the house. My mom was working a double shift at the Bloomingdale's makeup counter. Since I had come home, she'd been working late most nights, which was unlike her. The last time I saw her working so hard was when my dad walked out on us.

Audrey came home around the time the news was on. She went to the fridge, heated some leftovers, and found a bag of chips. I still can't believe how much she could tuck away. She could probably hold her own against any one of the guys in my squad, but you'd never know it from looking at her. She was all angles—sharp and brittle.

She sank into the couch, on the left side where the cushions had more give. That was where Beetle, the yellow mutt, used to sleep. I was sitting there in the La-Z boy next to her, and we were quiet for a while. They were talking about the draft on the TV.

"I just don't believe it," Audrey said. "It's absolutely barbaric." She crushed a chip in her teeth, and I realized that she was fishing for some response.

"Barbaric," I repeated.

"I mean, you wouldn't have even gone over there if it weren't for the draft," she said.

She was right, but she wanted to hear that she was right, so I gave it to her and nodded.

After a minute, I said, "You're right. I would have ended up with Mr. Albright and that garage shop either way."

"Axel would've still gone," she said.

I pulled a blanket over my knee, recoiling at the thought. “No,” I told her, but she just shrugged. “Really,” I said, “Axel wouldn’t have gone.”

“Sure, he would have,” she said. “He loved camping. It was perfect for him.” She popped another chip in her mouth as if the matter were settled.

I had nothing to say, but underneath the fleece blanket, I was sweating. I remember that afternoon in the field sitting in the bleachers. He was stick-thin then, not the flabby roll-over soldier I met in Da Nang. He said he would follow me anywhere, so I dragged him halfway across the world.

My face flushed. It felt like I was back in the jungle humidity, being boiled alive. The blanket was suddenly too heavy to move, and my arms were too stiff anyways. Audrey must not have noticed the sudden, smothering heat I was feeling.

She was right; Axel did love camping. His favorite part was the marshmallows. The two of us would light those suckers up and use them as torches. I could see his face, sticky with dime-store chocolate. I wondered if he even had a single C-ration meal while he was there, or if he just ate with his needle-nose officers. He probably never had to heat up a meal with a pinch of C4 explosives or stretch out a unit of fruit for a whole day. I doubt Axel ever fired his weapon once. He probably never humped half a week with shrapnel lodged in his armpit because Ray lost the fucking map and we couldn’t call in a medivac without coordinates. Axel wasn’t in the same war I was in. But he died like any old grunt: thanklessly.

It was like there was a vacuum around me. The plush of the La-Z boy felt like I was sinking in a foxhole, just resting my eyes before Gringo called evening patrol. *Whoosh*—and I couldn’t take a breath in that stale, aired room. My chest burned with the effort, and my lungs longed for the suffocation of the warm jungle air. I drummed the fingers on my right hand,

wishing for something hard and metallic to wrap them around. I could hear Audrey saying something, maybe my name, but I didn't answer her. I just didn't have anything to say to her, nothing she could hear.

Axel Fletcher was my best friend, and if it weren't for my draft letter, if I didn't beg him to go, he would never have left home. And if Axel Fletcher didn't go to Vietnam, then he would have been just fine.

Finally, Audrey got up. She stood over me; her face crinkled in concern. Her hand crossed the distance between us, and she touched my shoulder. But I didn't feel a thing.

Treatise

On July 8, 1969 eight hundred soldiers of the 9th Infantry Division touched American soil at the McChord Air Force Base. Flown out of Saigon the day before, these men were the first of 25,000 soldiers whom President Richard Nixon swore to withdraw from the war that raged on halfway across the world, and they were considered by many as the lucky ones. The American presence in Vietnam would not end until April 1975 with the chaotic rescue of ten Marines who were accidentally stranded atop the roof of the U.S. Embassy for hours after the U.S. ambassador was flown out that morning by helicopter. President of South Vietnam Duong Van "Big" Ming, on only the third day of his presidency, surrendered unconditionally that very day to the Communist forces. Thus ended the longest American war to date, which began as a battle for independence from colonial rule that was dominated by larger world powers who circled each other viciously during the Cold War.

The Resistance War Against America. The Second Indochina War. The American War. The Vietnam conflict. The Baby Boomer's war. By any name, the Vietnam War captivated two decades of American politics and came to define a generation.

Many of the young men and women who served in Vietnam had fathers or older relatives who had served in World War II, a traditional war of grand campaigns, clearly defined battlelines, and the guiding principle of justice. There was an understanding that Vietnam was this younger generation's call to adventure and that this war would operate under largely the same doctrines of patriotism and heroism as the epic World Wars. Just as the fascists were defeated, so too were the communists to be stomped out. If not excitement, there was a sense of readiness and willingness reflected on by Larry Crews, who dropped out of college to enlist.

"Your country calls on you and you go," he stated in an interview with Military Families.[1] Over the course of the war, two-thirds of soldiers were volunteers. At least through the early to mid-sixties, Vietnam was just another war. The mythologized reluctant draftee would come later, as soldiers returned and the purpose of the war became less clear to the American public.

Despite having so recently witnessed the uncertain and unresolved affairs in Korea, many Americans expected a decisive and near-immediate victory. "I didn't want to miss it, good or bad. I wanted to be a part of it," [2] Nick Green recalled, who enlisted in 1970. In his memoir *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo writes of the "expectations, ever romantic, of what it was like to be a marine in the Far East." [3] Having spent some months in Okinawa, listless and unsure if the highly anticipated war would ever begin, Caputo and his battalion finally received the orders for Vietnam. He recalls how a platoon commander responded "as if it were the most wonderful thing that could happen to a man."[4] As for the infantry men, "the happy warriors," Caputo writes, they thought it "intoxicating to be racing through the darkness toward the unknown … Something important and dramatic was about to happen to them." [5] However, their heightened sense of bravos and unabashed eagerness for this splendid little war would soon be dashed as the blunt realities of chaos, confusion, and contradictions became evident.

The very country of Vietnam was chaotic, alien, and unforgivable. The lush emerald Giai Truong Son mountain range that spanned from Laos down the western spine of Vietnam, jutting into the eastern sea coast at times, harbored some of the world's most deadly species: giant centipedes with debilitatingly painful and lethal bites, venomous twenty-foot long snakes, and aggressive wild buffalo strong enough to fend off crocodiles and roaming tigers. As mountains

[1]Peterson, "Vietnam War Veteran: 'Your Country Calls on You and You Go," 1.
[2]Appy, "Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam," 54.
[3]Caputo, "A Rumor of War," 31
[4]Ibid, 40
[5]Ibid, 48

gave way to coastal lowlands and swampy deltas carved by freshwater rivers, dense tropical rain forests harbored the elusive and equally fearsome soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army and the southern communist insurgents known as the Viet Cong. Yet American soldiers would spend much of their time battling torrential downpours during monsoon season with deadly combinations of heat and humidity. Netting and insect repellent proved ineffective against the hordes of disease-ridden mosquitoes that were attracted to the ever-present pools of stagnant water left by the rain. Ten-pound bamboo rats, black leeches, and skin-blistering trench foot were other guaranteed dangers of the constant precipitation. Compared to the sprawling grasslands of the Great Plains or the concrete grid of New York, Vietnam was unlike anything the Americans had known. The country was wild, treacherous, and uncharmed by American defenses of flashlights, radios, or herbicide. Simply put, it was a chaos that American strategists and ground troops had little defense against.

While American soldiers razed the tops of mountains for bases and ground troops forced their way through cruel jungle labyrinths with machetes and explosives, enemy soldiers saw little use in forcing the land to their will. Rather than taking and holding territory, the enemy was constantly on the move, dispersing and reforming days later with infuriating ease, often leaving lone snipers or ingenious traps to lacerate American forces. A quiet patrol could turn deadly with masterfully disguised bamboo stakes underfoot or rigged maces of hardened mud and sharpened stakes waiting to swing from the trees and impale an unlucky soldier. Curious GIs looking for souvenirs might tug on an abandoned Viet Cong flag, only to release a volley of arrows or spring a board of nails at his face. Soldiers might spend a day with a metal-detector clearing bombs from a trail or field, only to have it resown overnight with more and worse explosives by enemy soldiers who preyed on the false-security the Americans had in their machinery. Often GIs would

find their own supplies harnessed as deadly contraptions. Empty C-ration could be rigged with grenades. Fifty-gallon drums could be hung from trees by a tripwire with the steel exterior shredded into deadly spikes. At no point could soldiers relax behind friendly lines—every inch of the country was subject to war.

Horrors of all kinds awaited American soldiers at every turn as the enemy continually slipped away, making "search and destroy" a near impossibility. Even the dead did not stay in place, often dragged away and hidden to confuse, frustrate, and terrify American troops. The enemy seemed invisible amid the triple-canopy jungles, where sunlight could not reach the ground and visibility was reduced to no more than a few yards. In addition to countless mountain caves and miles of hidden tunnels throughout the country, enemy soldiers crouched in spiderholes, very small one-man foxholes, where they might wait for days to ambush patrols. The most dangerous were the enemy soldiers who wadded among women and children in rice paddy fields during the day, the smiling informants who gave American officers haircuts on base, and the Viet Cong who slipped into southern cities disguised among civilians and refugees. American soldiers had every reason for paranoia, as the enemy remained elusive as ghosts who revealed themselves only in the flashes of rifle muzzles or in the distant *pop* of 152 mortars, followed by the screeching arrival and crunching impact of ninety-pound shells.

The soldiers lacked defined battlelines and were often frustrated by the ephemeral presence of the enemy, which created a confusion that fatigued soldier's morale and eventually broke the American spirit. Traditional wars are measured by territory and conquest. However, despite their superiority of firepower and manpower, Americans could not win the war by simply having military domination in any given province. The insurgent nature of the Communist Vietnamese armies meant the U.S. would have to establish a strong republic in the south,

resistant to future rebellions—something the corrupt South Vietnam government could not have managed, let alone identify and eliminate the underlying causes of the unrest. The United States had committed itself to a military endeavor with this vague goal, not having any traditional metrics with which to reassure the public of victory, so it turned to body counts. How many of them died compared to how many of us died. It was a gruesome development, the obsession of numbers that were often massaged to preserve the pride of higher ups. The American public was fed messages of triumph and promised their boys would be home by Christmas. Yet, year after year of anticipation while the war dragged on made it more and more difficult for the public to be sated, especially as disillusioned veterans came home, revealing some of the truths about what was happening on the thin strip of coast halfway across the world.

On February 27, 1968 President Lyndon Johnson gave a speech in Dallas. "I do not believe that America will ever buckle,"[6] he declared. That evening in a CBS News Special, Walter Cronkite famously called for an end to the Vietnam War through negotiations, pointedly stating that, "We've been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders."[7] The American public's response of betrayal and outrage was part of a larger loss of innocence, equally experienced by every soldier who hoped to be home by Christmas. Jahn Baky argues that, for this, Vietnam Era fiction acts "as an interpreter of an entire generation's and later a nation's violently fractured concept of itself."[8]

To convey anything of importance about the Vietnam War, writers had to convince their readers of the reality of chaos, confusion, and contradictions. In the early sixties and the years following the war, a style of news writing developed that borrowed techniques from fiction, weaving facts into the folds of narrative, often with the reporter acting as a subjective

[6] Campbell, "W. Joseph Campbell: Recalling the mythical 'Cronkite Moment,'" 1.
[7] NPR, "Final Words: Cronkite's Vietnam Commentary."
[8] Baky, "Vietnam War Fiction," 8.

interpretive lens. Similarly, the canon of literary fiction coming from the Vietnam Era is distinguished by a fierce loyalty to reality above factitious events—employing metafiction and fictionalized author-characters who guide readers through nonlinear timelines, around the constantly rotating cast of characters, and into the emotional and spiritual truths the soldiers experienced, which are inaccessible to readers by traditional literary methods. Particularly with fiction, Donald Ringnald writes, these novels in "tone and structure eschew the methods and rationale of the American military operation. Instead they emulate the ways the *Viet Cong* fought. Put another way, they are *Vietnam* novels."[9]

With the heart of the matter present at all times, tangible in every sentence and turn of the page, yet elusive and guised in ever-changing characters, weaving between the delicacies of morality and encounters with violence that are almost spiritual, Vietnam Era literature is utterly unto itself as it attempts to reveal the "the stuff that slips away mercury-wise from proper historians," as Robert Kee stated. "No wonder it is artists who re-create life rather than try to re-capture it who, in one way, provide the good historians in the end."[10] Rather than relying on factitious timelines or details, these authors—the ones who are honest—write with earnest conviction, using all the tools and trappings of fiction to convey truth and memories or simply to "purse the self-torment, hostilities, frustrations, and moral doubts … find meaning amidst confusion or merely clear away some of the confusion so true understanding can take place later."[11] As these writers attempt to breach the limits of narrative in the pursuit of honest storytelling, their conviction is matched with a self-conscious despondency, an understanding

[9] Ringnalda, "Fighting and Writing: America's Vietnam War Literature," 28.
[10] Kee (cited by Taylor) "The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film," 16.
[11] Heberle, "Vietnam Fictions," 682.

that no amount of fictional truth can fully convey the tangible, emotional, or spiritual reality of war.

Meaningful stories are necessary. At the same time, writing meaning into stories is necessarily futile. Similarly, it is futile for me—a student whose role in the largely peaceful American landscape has been docile—to fool myself into thinking I could research, understand, and thus portray the totality of wartime experiences of a Vietnam soldier, and yet to try was necessary. I do not have the conviction veteran and civilian writers of the Vietnam Era possess. Rather than try to convey truth, as they had, I was attempting to look for it. In this process, I strove to be respectful and responsible in the quality of my research as well as creative in my writing.

There is a mantra within the writing community: write what you know. I learned, in a creative writing summer course, the secret ending to that golden rule: write what you know or write about what you don't know and learn it *fast.* I have always preferred the latter, not wanting to rely on my own experiences as inspiration because they are rather dull and uninspiring to begin with. Writing has always been my main avenue for learning. Over the course of my short writing career, I have learned how to see a tampon through the eyes of a young boy, how to make coffee for the ghost of an ex-girlfriend's aborted child, the protocol for ear-biting at nursing homes, and the gossip of atoms after a solarwind storm—among other things. Learning about the Vietnam War was another challenge I took to heart.

I have always admired the plight of military heroes with veterans on both sides of the family. My grandfather, after acting as Chief of Staff for a construction force regiment in Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis, spent over four years traveling between Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines as a Captain for the Seabees. There is much I do not know about my late

grandfather, even after paging through his military files. Growing up, I remember a man who had the occasional, innocent affair with casino gambling and who loved apple pie in the morning—he wouldn't even bother to warm it up. His experiences in Saigon are unlike the soldier's I created in my story, but I am grateful for the chance to understand a tiny bit more about the man who raised my mother, as well as the second-cousin on my father's side of the family who, as my father remembers, was always a little dark after the war.

What would become *Over There* began as a nine-page draft in a fiction workshop class that largely focused on the moment Sam and Axel meet at the firebase in Da Nang after months of separation. It was the story I had the most fun researching, and I wanted to continue that combination of research and writing during my thesis. I considered experimenting with various structures—fictional diary entries, collections of letters, short stories from soldiers across the country or about the families left behind. I even thought of playing with magical realism and a nonlinear timeline. All this, however, was abandoned. Managing the evolution of a boy to a man, a civilian to a soldier, and a soldier to a Marine all proved challenging enough, and Realism at times seemed more fantastical than any sort of mind-bending illusions I could pull off had I strayed into the magical side of things.

As I took my short story and tried to coax it to just short of a novella length, I quickly realized that I was working on the wrong character. In earlier drafts, the souls of the two characters, Sam and Axel, were switched with Axel being the one who was hardened by war and Sam the over-eager friend whose support in the rear role shielded him from traumatic violence and uncertainty, but I was still telling the story through Sam's perspective. I came to understand that it was more important for readers to witness the transformation of the front lines to begin to understand the difference between the war experiences of ground soldiers and rear

detachments—and it was especially important that, as the writer, I explored the potential of that transformation as well. In this draft, by the time readers encounter Axel at Da Nang, we are together with Sam in his repulsion, annoyance, and envy of his childhood friend, encouraging Sam as he *willfully* tells Axel a false story, including a fictional and violent ending in the valley of white ash with the gruesome death of a soldier who never existed. Even with Sam's dismissive bravos, he is desperate to tell the wrong true story in his frustration, which ultimately lands on amazed, but deaf ears.

I have drawn much inspiration from Tim O'Brien. *The Things They Carried* was perhaps one of the first books I have ever *read*. Both the flirtations between truth and reality and emphasis on the psychological importance of narratives had an early influence on my literary identity. As I researched for my own writing, I consulted nonfiction, memoirs, fiction, documentaries, and long form interviews—I was even privileged to conduct a number of interviews myself with veteran Marines who served in the war, all with the hopes of flavoring my writing with authenticity on a tangible and emotional level.

Above all, my aim was to be compassionate enough to tell a story that was not mine.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I need to express absolute gratitude and reverence to my supervisor, Professor Cásares for his support of my stories, patient guidance, and gracious commitment to always offering roughly equal amounts of critique and praise. I am thankful, always, to him for my first exposure to creative writing in the stuffy conference room of Parlin Hall during a workshop course over the summer. Even though he "wasn't sure" about me when I came back for a second class, he has been wonderfully supportive as I improved my research and storytelling instincts. I was also blessed with an equally incredibly second reader, Professor Elizabeth McCracken, who encouraged my taste for writing about characters who were completely unlike myself.

My research would not have been complete without the gracious veterans who gave me unique insights into the years of their service. The creators of Star Wars have my condolences for giving Captain Paul Horton the lifetime dream of being a pilot, which he would accomplish in the Air Force. Frank Caudle, a Staff Sargent in the Marines, provided story after story about OCS, rivalries between branches, and what it was like to have boots on the ground near the DMZ. I also had the honor of talking with Larry Meacham. Years after flying Cobras with the Army, Larry has had the Vietnamese people on his heart, returning to Ho Chi Minh City to engage with students and share his love for Jesus.

Bibliography

Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Ainslie, Ricardo, director. *The Mark of War*. Dos Manos, 2018.

American Prairie Filmworks. “Al White: The Story of a Marine Grunt in the First Battle of Khe Sanh (April 1967).” *Youtube* video, 1:19:38. June 20, 2019.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWJ5yxuvTMw&feature=youtu.be.

Baky, John S., "Vietnam War Fiction" (1994). *Articles and Conference Papers*. 2. https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnam_papers/2

“Vietnam: A Television History; America Takes Charge (1965 - 1967); Interview with Edward J. Banks, 1982.” WGBH Media Library & Archives. http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_1BBD5E1108E947579F9F0402807D5C23.

Brent0331. “Individual uniforms, weapons & gear of the U.S. Army and Marine Infantryman during the Vietnam war.” *YouTube* video, July 22, 2019. https://youtu.be/6f1it_i358U.

Brunch, Will. “50 Years Ago, Walter Cronkite Told America the Bitter Truth. We Need More Cronkites Today.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. February 22, 2018. https://www.inquirer.com/philly/columnists/will_bunch/walter-cronkite-vietnam-special-50th-anniversary-lbj-trump-truth-20180222.html.

Burns, Ken, director. *The Vietnam War.* PBS Distribution, 2017.

Campbell, Joseph. “W. Joseph Campbell: Recalling the mythical ‘Cronkite Moment.” *UC Press Blog* (blog). February 26, 2020. https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/4249/w-joseph-campbell-recalling-the-mythical-cronkite-moment/.

Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.

Carpenter, Lucas. “‘It Don't Mean Nothin'’: Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism.” *College Literature*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2003, pp. 30–50. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25112718.

CBS Evening News. “Vietnam War, 1970: CBS camera rolls as platoon comes under fire.” *YoutTube* video, April 30, 2015. https://youtu.be/89_3DgW_7mg.

Clark, Allen. *"Oh, God, I'm Dead": A Journey Back to Life*. Texas Publishers Co, 1986.

Couturié, Bill, director. *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. Couturie Company, 1987.

Filkins, Dexter. *The Forever War*. New York, New York: Vintage Books, 2009.

Final Words: Cronkite's Vietnam Commentary.” NPR. NPR, July 18, 2009. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106775685.

Frank Caudle, interviewed by author, Austin, February 12, 2020

Franklin, Charles. “A Statistical Companion to ‘The Vietnam War.’” *Medium* blog. November 14, 2017. https://medium.com/@PollsAndVotes/a-statistical-companion-to-the-vietnam-war-7353f1b8abf5.

Franklin, H. Bruce. "Can Vietnam Awaken Us Again? Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War." *The Radical Teacher*, no. 66 (2003): 28-31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20710189.

Gioia, Phil. “Gourmet Grunts, 1968-70.” *HistoryNet*, HistoryNet, 24 July 2017. www.historynet.com/gourmet-grunts-1968-70.htm.

Greenspan, Jesse. “How the Vietnam War Ratcheted Up Under 5 U.S. Presidents.” History. March 14, 2019. https://www.history.com/news/us-presidents-vietnam-war-escalation.

Gregory, Hamilton. “McNamara's Boys.” *HistoryNet*, HistoryNet, 2017, www.historynet.com/mcnamaras-boys.htm.

Hastings, Max. “The Vietnam War: Filthy, Hungry, Riddled with Bug Bites.” *Max Hastings*, HarperCollinsPublishers, September 13, 2018. www.maxhastings.com/2018/the-vietnam-war-filthy-hungry-riddled-with-bug-bites/.

Heberle, Mark A. "Vietnam Fictions" *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, pp. 205-13. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b1rx.26.

Hemingway, Albert. *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*. Naval Institute Press, 1994.

Herzog, Tobey C. "Writing about Vietnam: A Heavy Heart-of-Darkness Trip." *College English* 41, no. 6 (1980): 680-95. doi:10.2307/375917.

History. “First U.S. troops withdrawn from South Vietnam.” A&E Television Networks. November 16, 2009. https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-u-s-troops-withdrawn-from-south-vietnam.

Iowa PBS. “U.S. Evacuation and Fall of Saigon During the Vietnam War.” *Youtube* video, 2:47. October 21, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BVRhsqHE5M.

Irvin, John, director. *Hamburger Hill*. Paramount, 1987.

Jacobs, Rodger. *Stained with the Mud of Khe Sanh: A Marines Letters from Vietnam ; 1966-1967*. McFarland, 2013.

Kalu, Michael Chimaobi. “Vietnam Vermin: The Story of the Tunnel Rats.” *War History Online*, Timera Media, September 27, 2019. www.warhistoryonline.com/instant-articles/tunnel-rats-of-the-vietnam-war.html.

Kelly, Jeff. *DMZ Diary A Combat Marines Vietnam Memoir*. McFarland, 1991.

Lair, Meredith H. “Easy Living in a Hard War: Behind the Lines in Vietnam.” *HistoryNet*, HistoryNet, August 7 2012. www.historynet.com/easy-living-in-a-hard-war-behind-the-lines-in-vietnam.htm.

Larry Meachem, interviewed by author, Austin, February 6, 2020.

Li, Xiaobing. *Voices from the Vietnam War: Stories from American, Asian, and Russian Veterans*. University Press of Kentucky, 2012.

Lovett, Christopher C. “A Walk in the Sun: Reflections on Teaching the Vietnam War.” *The History Teacher*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1997, pp. 77–92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/494182.

Marlantes, Karl. *What It Is like to Go to War*. Atlantic Books, 2012.

Mike B. “The Vietnam War-Episode 1: Jungle Fatigues.” *YouTube* video, February 15, 2019. https://youtu.be/Vmjtcqihhpc.

Mike B. “The Vietnam War-Episode 2: The Use of Helmets by soldiers in Country.” *YouTube* video, February 16, 2019. https://youtu.be/nURtzlDM6To.

Mike B. “The Vietnam War-Episode 7: The Ace of Spades Worn in Helmet Band. Was It?” *YouTube* video, February 26 2019. https://youtu.be/1X5pSgZ6gK0.

Mike B. “The Vietnam War-Episode 12: Jungle Boots.” *YouTube* video, March 8, 2019. https://youtu.be/fbWNPHJIC8I.

New York State Military Museum. “Kenneth Green, US Marine Corps, Vietnam War.” *YouTube* video, October 7, 2015. https://youtu.be/3EnfceYpofU.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*. New York: Grove Altantic, 2015.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. "On True War Stories." *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, 223-50. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2016. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjk2xtq.12.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

Oliver, Myrna. “Duong Van Minh; Last President of S. Vietnam.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 2001. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-aug-08-me-31712-story.html.

Peterson, Samantha. “Vietnam War Veteran: 'Your Country Calls on You and You Go': Military Veterans.” Military Families. Ameriforce Media, April 3, 2020. https://militaryfamilies.com/military-veterans/vietnam-war-veteran-your-country-calls-on-you-and-you-go/.

Paul Horton, Susan Horton, interviewed by author, Austin, February 6, 2020.

Philip Gavin. “The Vietnam War: The Bitter End 1969 - 1975.” https://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1969.html.

Potter News Network. “Sgt. Fred Elbert, USMC, Vietnam Veteran, P.O.W. survivor, tells his story.” *YouTube* video, 10 November 2014., https://youtu.be/oCjs85LhmpY.

Ringnalda, Donald. “Fighting and Writing: America's Vietnam War Literature.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1988, pp. 25–42. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27554936.

Rusche, Harry. "Hemingway." *Lost Poets of the Great War*, edited by Harry Rusche, Emory University. www.english.emory.edu/LostPoets/Hemingway.html.

Selective Service System. “Induction Statistics.” https://medium.com/@PollsAndVotes/a-statistical-companion-to-the-vietnam-war-7353f1b8abf5.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Penguin Books, 1977.

Taylor, Mark. “Telling True War Stories.” *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2003, pp. 10–32. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrm1c.7.

The United States War Dogs Association, Inc. “Vietnam Statistics.” http://www.uswardogs.org/vietnam-statistics/.

Vietnam Tankers. “Vietnam Tankers - Operation Meade River - Randy Roberts.” *YouTube* video, January 2, 2014. https://youtu.be/Y_sozWU3_Ds.

Willson, David. “REMS, Pogues, and Housecats: The Rear Echelon in Vietnam War Fiction.” *The VVA Veteran*, Vietnam Veterans of America, November 2015. vvaveteran.org/35-6/35-6_willson.html.

White, John Norman. "*A History of Inflight Entertainmen*t" (PDF). Airline Passenger Experience Association.

About the Author

Josephine Hill was born in 1998 in Hefei, China. She graduated in May 2020 with degrees in Rhetoric & Writing and Plan II with a minor in Philosophy and a Creative Writing Certificate at the University of Texas in Austin. She will be attending Texas State University in the fall to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in fiction with Tim O'Brien.